SILENCE LIKE BLOOD:
A TRANSLATION

by

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A THESIS

Presented to the Department of Romance Languges
and the Honors College of the University of Oregon
in partial fulfillment for the requirements
for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts

March 2003

APPROVED: [redacted]

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An Abstract of the Thesis of

Lauren Meredith Manes for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

in the Department of Romance Languages to be taken March 2003

Title: SILENCE LIKE BLOOD: A TRANSLATION

APPROVED: [redacted]

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Le Silence Comme Le Sang, by Marie-Célie Agnant, a Haitian writer living in Québec, recounts the semi-autobiographical stories of the author's youth and her flight from her native country. Throughout the stories run the common themes of violence, familial ties, oppression, and fear, particularly of speaking out. Societal norms are challenged and traditions questioned. This translation includes a translator's introduction about both the process and theories of translation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to my advisors Professors Barbara Altmann and Frances Cogan, and particularly to Professor Karen McPherson, who was indispensable throughout the process, and without whom about half the text would still be in French. Additional thanks are due to all my friends who helped by reading the rough drafts and scribbling all over them, especially Olly Ruff, who should give up math to be an editor. And, of course, I owe everything to Marie-Célie Agnant, the author of the original work, for her permission to translate and her encouragement to publish, but also for the support she has given me throughout the process.

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Translation is an inherently subjective task. Usually, and particularly with literary translations, the work being translated (the source text) is strongly influenced by the culture in which it is set, the language in which it is written, and the personal and cultural identity of the author. A translator must therefore have a firm grasp of the source culture and its history, as well as the factors that contribute to the identity of the author (not to mention the obvious necessity of comprehension of the source language). These factors must then be taken into account in the translated work. In other words, "the purpose of translation is to enable the reader to understand the meaning of the original text in the context of that original text" (Percival 89). I therefore intend this thesis, which I hope is an accurate representation in English of the book *Le Silence Comme le Sang* by Marie-Célie Agnant, a Haitian author living in Quebec, to allow the reader access both to a culture and to literature that has previously been unavailable to English speakers.

The process of translation can be a confusing one. Even politics manages to play a role in the different theories of translation. One's philosophy and political agendas can also affect translation, though whether they should is a controversial subject. For example, in *Translation and Gender: Translating in the Era of Feminism*, Luise von Flotow gives examples of "interventionist feminist translators":

> Just as translators may develop political sympathies for experimental feminist writing and then transfer those attitudes to their work, so translators who are already politicized may take offence at texts that are unpalatable or politically unacceptable. (24)

These translators find it acceptable to alter the meaning of the source text through their translations, or even to omit sections that are particularly "unpalatable." This issue of transparency, or lack thereof, in translation is one that has often been debated, but the norm for many (if not most) translators is to attempt to remain neutral in relation to the subject matter -- although clearly most literary translators choose works they find interesting -- and to be "invisible" in their work. Clearly, different theories of translation exist in which the translator does not need to refrain from inserting her or his own personality into the work through the language choices. Fortunately, such a situation has not arisen in this work, although I decided ahead of time that if it should, I belong to the camp that believes a translator should be transparent and not influence the text, instead simply rendering it accessible to members of his or her own culture and language group.

My problems with the process have, instead, been those that pertain to the transfer of the meaning of the text from French to English. Many of the problems I encountered were ones not specific to this work or to me, but rather ones that any translator finds, caused by characteristics that are specific to the languages involved. Obviously, all languages differ in many distinct ways, and some styles of writing are harder to translate than others. When dealing with literature, the translator has to pay attention to alliteration, assonance, rhythm, rhyme, and other literary conventions (culturally determined or influenced metaphors and idioms, for example) that, at the very least, affect the way the author meant the work to be read, but may also contribute to the meaning of the text. Thus, an attempt to translate even a single line of Ralph Waldo Emerson's poetry into Old Javanese might be almost impossible because of various factors: the characteristics of English, of Emerson's writing, and of Old Javanese, which has a very different sentence structure than English and no word for "I."

Between French and standard modern English, though, there are fewer problems than with Emerson and Old Javanese. English and French "share a vast common stock of Latin-derived syntax and vocabulary and the like" (Frame 73) -- sentence structures are relatively similar, and it is estimated that at least half of English vocabulary comes from French, thanks mostly to the Norman conquest of England in 1066. Nevertheless, in a translation from French to English, I will still encounter a few fundamental differences between the languages that will affect my work.

Some characteristics of French just do not transfer well to English. One of the most common verb tenses in French, *passé composé*, can be constructed in such a manner that its meaning can be ambiguous. For example, on page 47 of "*La Maison Face à la Mer*" ("The House by the Sea"), the phrase "*Tous les autres, ceux qui ne sont pas morts, sont partis*" can be translated three ways: "all the others, the ones who aren't dead, are gone," "all the others, the ones who haven't died, have left," or "all the others, the ones who didn't die, left." The construction can, in this situation, be interpreted either as the past tense of the verb or as the verb "be" plus an adjective. Fortunately, this is not a problem that occurs with regularity, and, in any case, here the meanings of the two options are not vastly different.

Another common problem is that of gender. French nouns are gendered, which has no equivalent in English, nor does the question of formal versus informal pronouns. The gender question is relatively easily solved, though it always gives pause. A particular example comes from "*Le Silence Comme le Sang*" ("Silence like Blood"); throughout the story, the narrator refers to *marchandes* selling fruits and vegetables on the streets or owning and operating food booths. This word, related to *marché* (market), is easily translated as "vendor," but *marchande*, due to the *e* on the end, is strictly feminine, whereas "vendor" has no gender connotation. My list of options included "saleslady," "merchant," and "vendor," but there is no exactly equivalent word in English for "woman who sells things publicly." I also briefly debated leaving the word in the original French, footnoting it with the meaning at its first occurrence, but in the end I decided to translate it at each occurrence as "vendor" and find another way to express the fact that they are women, when it is relevant. Their femininity is not hugely important at all occurrences, but when it is, I was able to refer elsewhere to the *marchande* as "she," circumventing the problem.

Similar to the gender problem, but more complex, is that of formality. Most European languages distinguish between a formal and an informal second-person pronoun -- Spanish has *tù* and *usted*, German has *du* and *Sie*, and French has *tu* and *vous*. This distinction is no longer made in modern English, however, so anytime the distinction is important in the source text, the translator must find some way to represent the meaning of the distinction in English. These formulas of politeness, however, "rarely correspond exactly between two languages -- or different moments in one language: you must usually overdo or underdo" (Frame 73). Therefore, making that distinction often involves using titles (Mr., Sir, Madam, etc.) or a more or less formal tone of speech, but usually cannot exactly replicate the meaning or the effect of the source language.

This leads into the question of tone -- to what extent should the translation be natural or stylized? If the author uses vulgar or offensive language, should the translator do so also? If the original text includes a great deal, or even a little bit, of patois[1] or slang, what should the translator do? The answers to these questions are usually dependent on the original work, the translator, and the target audience of the translation, especially in the case of slang. Often a translator will attempt to find a cultural equivalent or approximation for a source-language slang term using the slang or patois with which the translator is most familiar. Obviously, a French slang word would be translated differently in American English than in British English; for example, *mec* in French could produce "guy" in American English or "bloke" in British English. In this situation, the translation depends heavily on the culture of the translator as well as that of the author; it will be targeted to the specific audience that identifies with the translator's culture. The fact that this work comes from a country with two languages, French and Creole, each of which has its own cultural and socio-economic connotations, adds yet another level of complexity to the question. At several points, particularly in "*Le Silence comme le Sang*" ("Silence like Blood"), Agnant has included bits of conversation with Creole-speaking Haitians that are actually written in Creole. Since her target audience is not a Creole-speaking population, however, she translates the phrases into French. In this situation it was clear to me that I should leave the Creole there, simply translating the translations, so that the English-speaking audience gets the same effect of the Creole as the French-speaking audience does.

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[1] Any local vernacular or dialect that deviates from the standard language, and sometimes carries a connotation of uneducated speech.

Another issue that accompanies the attempt to make something from one culture comprehensible to members of another is that of how to translate metaphors, similes, and other phrases that are culturally determined. Obviously, the language difference only complicates matters that can already be confusing to same-language members of different cultures. One example that gave me particular trouble is also from "*Le Silence comme le Sang*." On page 54, Agnant uses the phrase "*entre chien et loup*," which, directly translated, means "between dogs and wolves." In French, however, this phrase carries a connotation of twilight, mystery, and change; while a perceptive English-speaking reader could infer something of the sort from a direct translation, the phrase does not carry the same meaning as in French simply because it does not exist in English. I thought about taking out the "dogs and wolves" part completely and just saying "between something decent and something monstrous." But in the next paragraph, Agnant refers back to the "*chien et loup*" phrase, playing on its figurativeness by turning it literal: "*Parlant de chiens et de loups,...*" ("Speaking of dogs and wolves, ..."); she then goes on to tell a story about watching several dogs in the street. This would make no sense at all if I were to leave out the actual dog-related sentence in the first paragraph. Here I had a problem. Should I leave it strictly as is, trusting the reader to understand the meaning of the first phrase? Should I remove it entirely and replace it with something more comprehensible? Or both -- should I leave in "*entre chien et loup*" but add another sentence to clarify? After much discussion with several people, I decided on the last option. The final translation reads, "partway between dogs and wolves, between a life that can be seen in the daylight and something that hides its face in the shadows."

All these puzzles raise the question of accuracy in translation versus style: is it better to retain the literal meaning of the original text, or to approximate or mirror the author's stylistic choices? It is true that the two are very intricately connected in genres such as poetry or song, but since, clearly, all languages differ, one must at some point be favored at the expense of the other. Once again, the literary conventions such as alliteration and assonance come into play -- even in strictly prose works, the translator sometimes must sacrifice the convention to retain the meaning. Examples of this are more easily explained verbally, particularly with French and English, since French sounds much different than it looks and. a rhyme or other convention might not be clear from looking at the words, but when spoken they are evident. However, an easy example is the case of the title of Agnant's book, "*Le Silence Comme le Sang*." Even those who have no familiarity with spoken French can easily recognize the alliteration in the words *silence* and *sang*. The very direct literal translation of this title is "Silence Like Blood." This title, while maintaining the main themes and ideas of the original French title in the words "silence" and "blood" (both of which recur in the stories) has none of the poetic sound of the original alliteration. This title has been one of my main problems since I chose to translate this book. To complicate the problem even more, words can evoke the idea of other semi-homophonic words; *sang* (blood) sounds like *son* (sound, which contradicts with *silence*), and *le sang* sounds like *leçon* (lesson). All of these echoes affect the comprehension of the title in French. Unfortunately, these are almost impossible to transfer in a translation; one can only hope to avoid infelicitous associations.

The aforementioned problem of dogs and wolves is another example of a situation in which I had to choose between style and technical accuracy. I felt very uncomfortable about inserting my own words into the work, creating something that had not been there in the original, but here, I felt I had no other viable option.

Another illustration of this problem is the story "*Deux Jours pour Oublier*" ("Two Days to Forget"). The content of this story and its style are directly connected. The story is about a woman who is sickened by the news from home that her brother has been killed; the sentences are deliberately choppy, short, and somewhat jumbled, intended to make the reader feel as sickened, dizzy, and confused as the narrator does. However, in the original, the choppiness is accomplished almost entirely with commas: "*Il était six heures du matin, maman s'en allait à l'église, quelque chose retenait la porte, maman a poussé plus fort*"

(p. 31). My first draft of this story kept the punctuation intact, this sentence becoming "It was six o'clock in the morning, Mama was going to church, something was blocking the door, Mama pushed harder." Upon rereading, however, I found I was not entirely satisfied with the effect. Somehow, I felt the repetition of commas did not make it as jerky in English as it is in French. I tried changing to short, terse sentences instead of longer, broken-up ones, and was much happier with the result: "It was six o'clock in the morning. Mama was going to church. Something was blocking the door. Mama pushed harder." Even this seemingly minor detail influenced the story's total effect. Again, I felt uncomfortable about changing this from the original style; this was the first story I translated, however, and as I went on, I realized that little compromises like this, keeping the meaning and the effect of the story but sacrificing small stylistic conventions, were not as awful and traitorous as I had first thought.

Sometimes the style versus accuracy problem solved itself. Even with phrases that may or may not have been unintentional on Agnant's part, but that I enjoyed, I wanted to recreate the parts that pleased me. On page 90 of "*Le Silence comme le Sang*," there just happens to be a little rhyme in the middle of a sentence: "*un vol de lucioles*." This phrase charmed me, and I was unhappy at having to lose its delicacy, until I wrote it down and realized that it is accidentally pretty in English too: "a flight of fireflies."

As previously mentioned, an understanding of the identity -- linguistic, cultural, and personal -- of a work and its author is central to the comprehension of the translation. The work must be placed within the context in which it was originally written. Usually this is done with translator's notes (at the beginning or end of the work), often accompanied by footnotes. I have used footnotes and intend to include translator's notes of some kind, should

I publish. With this particular work, references to specific events in the history of Haiti will be necessary, which I will footnote along with other words or phrases (i.e. traditional songs in Creole, foods) that require descriptions or definitions. At least a brief history of the author's life will also be required: identity is not only important to the act of translation, but also to these particular stories. Many of the stories deal with issues of identity or with events that mirror the author's own flight from the country of her birth.

The history of Haiti's government is tumultuous. In a story we now know all too well, the native Arawak tribes of the island that now forms Haiti and the Dominican Republic were almost entirely extinguished by the conquistadores, starting with Columbus in 1492. The island was shared between France and Spain in 1697, and by 1780, it was one of the richest regions of the world, producing cocoa, cotton, sugar cane, coffee, and, of course, participating heavily in the slave trade, both of those imported from Africa and those second-generation Africans born on the island. A successful slave revolt in 1791 began a process that culminated in 1804 with Haiti's independence from France -- the first black independent nation. Because of class systems already in place between Creole-speaking darker-skinned slave descendents and French-speaking, lighter-skinned mulattos, the first president easily created a system in which he could abuse his power as he wished. The Spanish half of the island passed back and forth between Spanish and French rule several times between1795 and 1844, culminating in Dominican independence from Haiti in 1844. In Haiti, anarchy, poverty, and violence were rampant. The United States Marines occupied the country from 1915 to 1934, ostensibly as a peacekeeping force, though their presence also had the effect of further dividing the class system along color lines. After they withdrew, another period of confusion and power struggles followed. In 1957 François Duvalier, after having been elected President, declared himself President for life. Thus began a reign of terror -- Duvalier created a police state ruled by himself and his "police," called *tontons macoutes*. After his death in 1977, his son took over at the age of nineteen. Electoral and economic corruption flourished everywhere in Haiti. Duvalier the younger was finally exiled by the people in 1986, and Jean-Bertrand Aristide was elected. In 1990, the army took control of the government and ousted Aristide, who had been seen as the first leader elected by the people since 1804. He returned, however, in 1994, facilitated by the United Nations. He finished his term of office. René Préval was elected in 1995, and Aristide was re-elected in 2000 and continues to serve (Shroeder & *The Art of Haiti*).

Marie-Célie Agnant, the author of *Le Silence Comme le Sang*, was born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, in 1953. She left Haiti at almost sixteen, when she and her family decided she should go live with her godmother in Quebec. At that point Duvalier had been in power for twelve years. Agnant was about to finish an important stage in the school system, but she had become aware of the fact that even at the level of the schools, political power influenced many decisions; parents exerted their influence to see their children pass the tests and move on to the next stage, and Agnant and her family did not want her to be part of such a corrupt system. She left her parents and her home in Haiti and did not return for twenty years, though her mother frequently came to visit her in Quebec.

With immigration come questions of identity -- if you do not return to your home for twenty years, is it still your home? At what point does one stop being Haitian and start being Canadian? Agnant cleverly solves this problem by telling people who ask that she is whatever they want her to be. She has attended conferences both as a Canadian writer and as a Haitian writer. Then comes the question of race and language -- Agnant is black and

French-speaking and comes from not one but two countries divided along both language and race lines. Often she is asked why she does not write in Creole, to which she answers that in order to have her books read, they must be in French, since many or most Creole speakers in Haiti are illiterate. Nor does she write in English, though she is fluent; for her, writing is fundamentally linked to the French language; nevertheless, she is happy to have her work translated. Yet another aspect of her identity that comes through in her writing is the fact that she is female. Sexism, all the worse for being combined with racism, is a problem she encounters regularly, both in Haiti and in Quebec, and even from her fellow writers. "To me … my feminism is in the same category as the fight I lead against racism … against corrupted systems, against the political domination of entire populations . . . it's the same thing" (Agnant).

Agnant seems to always have been politically aware: "I don't want to ascribe [my departure from Haiti] to very individual or personal reasons, because, to me, exile, the displacement of populations, is part of the history of humanity" (Agnant). Her writing is, therefore, not just an expression of art but also a political act. Since she writes poetry, novels, short stories, and even children's books, she addresses the problems of society in Haiti and in the world in different ways and at different levels in each work. *Le Silence Comme le Sang* is a collection of five short stories, all of which are set in Haiti, and through all of which run common themes. Many of the stories pertain to self-imposed exile and the pain of leaving one's family behind, which is clearly something she writes from experience; others mention the terror of growing up in a politically unstable climate ruled by power-hungry police. Agnant says that the book is "very true" -- one of the stories is like "a photograph of [her] childhood," and another is like "a painting of [her] return to Haiti after twenty years"; the others are "based on things that you hear … things that you're told."

The largest problem I encountered in translation was my own emotional response to the fact that I have no real experience writing fiction. I was confident from the start in my ability to translate the meaning of the work accurately, particularly with the help of my advisors. I was not in the least, however, confident that I would be able to make the finished product, though perhaps a technically accurate translation, sound like real fiction in English, like something anyone would want to read. I had many resources available, including knowledgeable advisors and correspondence with Agnant herself, to help me address all the issues that could have arisen (and did arise) throughout the process, such as the problem with the title of the book, but I was still very insecure about the validity of my translation as a stand-alone piece of fiction. My solution to this problem was to give it to everyone I know who would take it, have them read it, and tell me if it sounded like real fiction. I found it also helped to set stories aside for a while after I considered them finished, coming back to them several weeks later to read them again; though I do not write fiction, I do read a great deal of it, and so was able to read them critically after I had allowed myself some time to un-memorize them a little.

A thorough comprehension of the factors that led to the creation of the book -- the historical and personal context of the stories -- was also crucial to my ability to successfully place the stories in English in that same context, therefore grounding them in a relevant reality, not just sending them adrift in the world with no framework.

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Escape

The family was first and foremost Grandmother the Queen. How could she be thought of by any other name? She was clearly the matriarch; she dominated her empire with her tall stature. She must have been almost six feet tall, and we had to stand on tiptoe to kiss her. Haughty, she barely stooped her shoulders towards me. I always saw Grandmother dressed in somber colors, and from the moment she got up in the morning, she exuded an odor of talcum powder, which she spread everywhere. When I came home from school, I found her on the porch, in her immense apple-green metal rocking chair, her large skirts spread out around her ankles. Starting at three o'clock in the afternoon, that was her observation post. We knew she was watching us through the hibiscus hedge that bordered the porch. Arriving five minutes late was not an option.

On returning from school, we had to plant a kiss on her forehead or on the hand she stretched out to us. A bit frightened by the net of bluish veins covering that hand, I kissed it rapidly, without pressing my lips to it too hard. She watched me furtively, with a look that slid under her glasses, a rapid inspection to assure herself that nothing was wrong, that my eyes weren't hiding some mischief.

Grandfather, however, came only on Sundays. He presented himself at around nine o'clock, after Mass. His grey coat hung open over an immaculate white shirt with a stiff collar like a strip of cardboard. The coat floated around him, swaying from left to right with the rhythm of his steps. The sound of his cane on the sidewalk and against the metal fence announced his arrival. Hearts pounding, we waited for him. I loved the feeling of my lips on his face. On his forehead, the skin was taut and shiny, while his cheeks were softer and raspier. He had lunch with us, the Sunday meal that was always a big party, where there was dessert, which could be rice pudding with raisins, or a cake that I remember being creamy and crusty at the same time, called *marquise*, or even meringues, which we called "sighs."

After the meal, Grandfather stayed all afternoon in Grandmother's rocking chair - Grandmother, on that day, confined herself to her room. With time, I understood that, unable to forbid the Sunday visits, Grandmother the Queen shut herself up so as not to see him.

Grandfather drowsed in the warmth of Sunday afternoon, rocked by the little familiar noises. From time to time, he opened his eyes, sucked on his pipe, followed an abandoned train of thought, and, suddenly, his head went back to nodding again. I emptied and cleaned his pipe, and refilled it with tobacco as quickly as he could consume it. I spent the entire afternoon with him, watching the curls of smoke escape his mouth, gently scratching his scalp with the help of a little comb, or plucking his white hairs. I didn't completely understand the pleasure that this little ritual and these child's hands could give him. I was just waiting for the coins he gave me before leaving, with which I hurried to the boutique to buy *piroulis*, pistachio bars and *titos*, or waited to welcome the ice cream man when the bell announced his arrival.

Sometimes I was a little afraid when he slept like that. His head settled on his chest, and I thought that his neck would break and he would never be able to get up again. I felt responsible for him; I thought that he had been entrusted to me, that I had to protect him. If his neck breaks, I told myself, they'll think it was my fault. And when I saw his dentures come dangerously close to the ground, I was afraid they would fall from his mouth. I woke him up then, and he assured me each time that he hadn't been sleeping at all.

For me, Grandfather was a hero because he had survived so many political torments. When he managed to stay awake, he transformed, to my great delight, into a history professor. That's how I learned about the good presidents, of whom there were few, and mostly about the misdeeds of those -- and they were numerous -- who were detested. Fortunately, at that time, the people knew how to remove them from the palace and drag them through the streets to the gallows. My favorite story was the one about a revolt during which the people rushed into the prison and freed all the prisoners. I listened to it in the grip of a sort of fright mixed with frenzy. He also liked to tell me about an event that, it seemed, had marked his life. For one reason or another, he had had to go somewhere on the train. At that time, there were trains! An important mission had been entrusted to him. But, at the last minute, because of political plots and maneuvering, someone else was dispatched in his place. The train derailed. All the passengers perished. I imagined that the mission had been very important, so he must have been hurt by what he considered an injustice towards him. He related this story to me to make me understand that a divine hand watched over him and that he had been spared somehow.

Unlike Grandmother, who had energy to spare and a voice that contrasted with her all-white hair, Grandfather seemed to me a fragile old man, despite his height and corpulence, because he was gentle, seldom spoke, and we could hear true gratitude in his voice when he thanked us for things we'd done for him.

Grandmother the Queen was ageless. She was straight as a post and never napped during the day. When sleep accidentally surprised her in her rocking chair, she straightened herself, quickly smoothed her hair and the pleats of her skirt, then, with a little repetitive movement, she adjusted her watch on her wrist and checked the time, to see how long she had slept and to ask herself what she may have missed during her nap.

She had, no doubt, been elegant, with a proud carriage that she had never lost. At home, we called her the commander. She monitored and regimented everything, from the little slivers of soap to the cat's saucer. Of course, like everything that moved and breathed in the house, the cat belonged to Grandmother the Queen. All the cats were named Mimi. One Mimi replaced another and they were all there to catch mice. Was it because they performed their duties so well, or because they had such a haughty air and a graceful and elegant allure, just like she did? In any case, Grandmother the Queen seemed to be pretty fond of them. She rewarded them by spoiling them, and sometimes she even petted them. And if, by chance, she called her Mimi and the cat didn't come, the children knew no rest until the cat was found. We punished the cats because Grandmother loved them. That was one of our favorite games, catching the cat and putting it on top of the tallest cupboard, and then laughing like little demons, watching it panic, desperately searching for a place to jump without finding itself at our mercy again. When I was seven years old, I was determined to hurt Grandmother as much as possible through her cats.

At five o'clock in the morning, Grandmother got up to supervise the preparation of the coffee and breakfast, inspecting us from all angles before we left for school: no hasty preparations, no hairdos inappropriate for children our age. Next she monitored the servant who did the shopping, checking on what time she came back, what supplies she brought back, how the food was prepared, if the table was set correctly, with the utensils placed on the right or on the left, the way she wanted it. Then she checked on the laundry, to see that the laundrywoman laid the clothes out in the sun on the huge white rocks to make them bright white, to see which ones needed to be ironed. All day, Grandmother came and went in the house, dusting the furniture with her long fingers. We would hear the sound of her rings on the wood. She nagged because the cleaning hadn't been done well, she lay in wait for the mailman, she gave her instructions regarding supper. And, when we thought she had finally gone to bed, she appeared, tiptoeing through the dark, to see what we were doing, if we were doing our homework or if we were having inappropriately daring conversations. Pity the child whose guilty silence indicated that he or she had fallen asleep over the homework! We couldn't wait for Sunday, so that Grandmother would go back in her hole.

In the evenings, before the prayers we repeated, kneeling, while she spied on us to see that we recited the litany of every last saint, we had to scratch her legs without hurting her. And if we managed to complete that chore without scraping her, she rewarded us with a story. The king had five daughters and the supplicants for their hands had to guess their names. Grandmother sang:

Cinq soeurs ho
Cinq soeurs ho
Almatala un
Almatakofi deux
Il est à moi trois
Bonbon béni quatre
SeSe lè Roi cinq.[1]

When she wanted to be nice, she let me comb her soft white hair, and I thought I had been promoted to princess.

In the family, we never asked questions. It was a rule that we instinctively internalized. Everyone followed it. Family was like faith. Through practice and experience, we learned the codes, the rules and the mysteries that blurred with time or became our own. With adulthood, we understood how silence, the most respected of all the rules, more often than not hid suffering and tears.

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[1] Traditional Haitian folk song.

Grandfather and Grandmother were, I think, the first mysteries of my life. Did Grandmother's fits of anger, during which she subjected this man to public scorn, hide some vast anguish? Behind Grandfather's gentle looks, was there another person whose presence on Sundays reopened Grandmother's painful wounds? He had surely been an attractive man once, and I found him still handsome, even when his dentures fell out of his mouth while he slept.

A little voice inside me constantly wanted to ask: why had he abandoned tranquility to take refuge by the sea in a house whose ground floor was a bazaar where they sold everything, from the *clairin* glass that would trick the hunger of whoever couldn't afford to buy food, to laundry soap and matches? The house was always full of people and the musty smell of smoked herring and weak alcohol. The house by the sea was dirty and noisy, and I didn't understand what Grandfather was doing in that place.

He lived there with a woman named Mélie who terrified me. She symbolized, to my eyes, all the wicked fairies in the childhood tales, because she had only one eye and she limped. Because of the memorable fit of anger that seized Grandmother when she talked about her, and the disdain that filled her voice when she called her "Antonin's mistress," I felt that Mélie was missing something important, something precious that could have saved her from contempt.

On New Year's Day, dressed in our new clothes and our shiny shoes, we went to Grandfather's house to wish him a happy New Year. It was exciting and terrible at the same time, because on that day we had to kiss Mélie, who, rolling her white eye from left to right, watched us to see if we had forgotten her. After the good wishes and the distribution of the New Year's gifts that Grandfather showered on us, she served us a pink, red, or green liqueur, and little slices of cake that we held between our thumbs and index fingers and dipped in our glasses. With a smile that meant well but looked strangely like a grimace, Mélie, delighted, contemplated our satisfied faces as we sipped from the tiny glasses that shone with the magic New Year's liqueur. I could barely restrain myself on those days; I wanted to ask Grandfather when he was going to come back, but I never dared. Children didn't ask questions.

Grandfather had a particular affection for Aunt Délia, his youngest daughter, who, moreover, looked a great deal like him. Like him, she was large and robust, and she also had his wide high forehead. She called him papa, and I was always surprised to see her, grown up and almost old already, practically become a child again when Grandfather came. Sundays, she was the one who served him his pumpkin soup and the little *pâtés* from Chez Camille, which she said was the best store. Grandfather ate slowly. I watched him. His jaw came and went in a funny gyrating movement. It seemed to me that he had far too many teeth and that they got in his way. The hand holding the spoon took forever to reach his lips. He chewed for a long time, then sucked in his lower lip and started over. After the meal, Aunt Délia carefully wiped his chin and chastised him because, despite his bib, he had stained his white shirt. She brought him something to drink and seated him in the rocking chair.

We were immediately touched by Aunt Délia's humility. The fact that she was single, without a husband or even a child of her own, intrigued us. There was a void in her that we felt it was our job to fill, but we couldn't, despite all our efforts. I believe we felt compassion for her, even if we secretly thought it was better this way. We didn't need to share her. She was all ours, forever. She was beautiful. Her skin, like Grandfather's, was the color of brown sugar, darker than Grandmother's, which looked like tallow and was almost translucent. She was chubby, fleshy without being fat, round as an orange. As a child, I always wanted to knead her arms, to curl up in her lap. She had thick hair that she stubbornly dyed, so often that I never knew its real color. But I remember, those Saturdays devoted to her major makeovers, the black of the dye stuck to her temples like rubber. I wish I had known Aunt Délia in her prime.

The face of Aunt Délia was like a door closed and locked twice, in front of which it was useless to wait. In her presence, I felt myself sucked into a tornado where tenderness and distress were mixed. I didn't know very well how to define all of that, but I lived with these impressions like a burning question that was eating my tongue, like an insect that buzzed all around me, or a grasshopper in my mouth. The look she gave me at those moments took away any desire I had to expose my worries aloud. Like Grandmother, she wore her glasses on the end of her nose and looked at us by leaning forward and opening her eyes wide. This paralyzed me. I invented her life, built all sorts of adventures around her. Her sad face inspired me. I imagined that she had been betrayed, hurt to the deepest core of her being by unfaithful lovers, that she kept these memories hidden in her like scraps of yellowed paper, in her large skirts, in her pockets. I knew that the family presumed without saying it that Grandmother's tyrannical vigilance was the cause of Aunt Délia's celibacy.

Sometimes she started singing. Her song lifted suddenly in some recess of the house, most of the time in her room where she was often shut up. In a clear voice, augmented with a few tremolos, she loosed two or three couplets of a ballad or a love song, then, abruptly, the silence fell again like a lead cape.

In the middle of this grand old house that we lived in, there was a banister that I slid down. All around the house was a porch, where in the afternoon the grown-ups would sip very black coffee or fruit juice, the same visitors every day, and always at the same time. On the second floor, there was an ornate balcony from which we could see the street. On the sidewalk, in front of the house, merchants sold sweets wrapped in cellophane, arranged like multicolored pearls in a case. In the evening, they wrapped everything back up again carefully and left, only to come back again the next day. I played pranks on the ones set up on the sidewalk under the balcony. I threw onto their heads anything I could get my hands on: water, little balls of paper, bottle caps. They looked up towards the balcony and cursed the little red-haired pest, and I ran away into some other corner of the house. If they decided to come complain to Grandmother, I was already far away, busily rocking a little rag doll named Beatrice.

When I was six or seven, I loved living in that house where we sometimes had parties. Those days, I paraded around in flounced dresses. I loved the tarlatan skirts and the polished shoes. I stuffed myself with those marvelous little sandwiches called *bouchées*, which casually disappeared in my mouth, two or three at a time. There were fruit ices prepared in a big wooden sorbet maker. Life, at that time, had the flavor and the velvety texture of a *crème au corossol*. I liked to see the grown-ups come and go, laughing and dancing. But at the same time, I hated them for those pleasures that I couldn't have. Like a little opera rat, I scurried everywhere, carting around a stomach laden with delicacies and a heart torn between the desire for a childhood that I wanted to last forever and the attraction of the joys reserved for adults. Never, I told myself, will I grow up fast enough to be able to enjoy these parties, too.

On an old phonograph of polished wood, embossed with the word ‘Telefunken’ in golden letters, a popular song played, whose lyrics have haunted me all these long years. In those carefree days, they already resounded in me like somber and disquieting premonitions. It was the story of a party given by Mr. Rat for a baptism. Never the brightest bulb, Mr. Rat had hired cats as musicians. At the stroke of midnight, the inevitable occurred: the cats locked the doors and ate all the rats.

My childhood started to disappear the day a man, whose name I have never been able to forget, arrived in the town. His name was Zacharie and he had revolvers in his belt. He arrived with an army of peasants who slept in the streets, on the sidewalks, everywhere. They carried long black rifles and wore pants and shirts cut from a coarse blue cloth, and they wore scarves around their necks. They hurled insults at us when we passed them, our knees trembling, on our way home from school. They were at the gate constantly, wielding their guns, asking for water to drink, something to eat, and other things we couldn’t refuse them. We had been instructed, the girls in particular, to hide as soon as they approached. I was just a child, but already I felt that my life didn’t belong to me anymore. Something whispered to me that the time had come to learn to be cunning and to walk close to the walls. Years later, we understood how rape was so often used as a weapon, and the reasons for Grandmother’s fury when the soldiers approached. She became more irritable day by day, going from one room to another grumbling and punishing us for every little thing.

Some evenings, we put out all the lights. Outside, gusts of machine-gun fire punctured the night. In the darkness, Grandmother ordered us to slide under our beds. I felt that an army of ferocious dogs was crushing my calves. I bit my arms so as not to scream. I slept, finally, my cheek to the floor, and I awoke often, in the middle of the night, torn from sleep by the shriek of sirens. I stretched out on my back, paralyzed with fear, until the roosters' song replaced the sirens' cry.

In the morning, the streets were full of people strolling about as though nothing had happened; fear had become a daily companion. Each person had to learn from that point on to live with it, and too bad if, during the night, fear gnawed at our bellies. We went to school and, there too, we pretended to have forgotten everything about the previous night and its terrors. We had already learned to be wary of the day, of confidences, of laughter, and above all of childhood secrets whispered in the courtyard. In the afternoon, returning from school, I would go look at an image of Our Lady of Perpetual Help on a little table in the corner of Grandmother's room. She had been placed on a beautifully embroidered cloth; in front of her, in a little crystal dish, a cotton wick floated in a mixture of oil and water. I looked at the Virgin's blue eyes. The flame lit her face and it almost seemed as if she smiled. It was a cardboard Virgin. How could Grandmother claim that she protected us? Her smile seemed to me to be far away, but I wanted to believe in it. One morning, Zacharie came to our house with all his men and gave us the order to leave the premises. He had claimed our house as his own.

We left the house. I remember every detail of the day the movers came. I hated them. I hated the entire world. I drifted from one empty room to another right up until we left. I remember the view we had of the courtyard: there was a magnificent garden, belonging to the nuns of Sainte-Rose. To me it was a forest. The nuns walked there, fingering their rosaries. I thought that paradise must look like that garden, with huge trees, an abundance of flowers, birdsong and the raucous crows, caw, caw, caw . . . That noise is in my head forever and sets the tempo of my memories with delight and melancholy.

The sun still beat as strongly, the sky was still dazzling, but the house we lived in was no longer my childhood home. There was no more balcony from which we could see the city lights. Almost no one walked in the street. This new house looked like a grey box, made of cement and concrete. The floors didn't creak under our feet, and there were no more wooden shutters to pull shut when the wind blew too hard. The windows were big square holes with metal bars. To all sides, I saw only dark clear-cut hillsides and spiny bushes with endlessly grazing goats whose plaintive bleating filled me with sadness and fright. The small daily pleasures had little by little made way for a mute distress. I had the impression that we had all caught a shameful disease whose only remedy was silence or escape.

Someone in the family disappeared. At first, he came sometimes in secret, during the night, for short visits. Then we didn't see him anymore. We started counting the days, and then the years. He never came back. It took me a long time to understand why my aunt sang endlessly, in a voice that trembled with sterile rage and pain, Tino Rossi's old refrain: "*Oh, mon papa, si beau, si grand, si merveilleux*[2]" The disappearance of that papa was one of the secrets that we could only mourn in silence.

Little by little, the new house was emptied out. One after another, Grandmother's children, the nieces, the grandchildren, all those who, before, had come and gone, left for other places with no hope of return. I remember those days when we returned from the airport, hearts broken, worn out from our long wrenching sobs.

Finally, there was only Grandmother the Queen (our commander), Aunt Délia (her associate), two or three cousins, and me. In the little sitting room were the heavy walnut chairs, the couch with its wicker bottom, and the oval table that I sometimes liked to polish, tirelessly pursuing the flecks of dust like evil insects -- but none of this furniture had been used in years. People had lost the habit of coming over for coffee, even after Sunday Mass. Must we also abandon the churches, Grandmother wondered, or should we pretend, there too, not to know anything about certain priests who hid revolvers under their cassocks, and who, from the pulpit, rebuked the rebels and the opposition fighters?

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[2] "Oh, my papa, so handsome, so tall, so marvelous" [*sic*] From "Oh! Mon Papa," words and music J. Boyer, P. Burkhard, 1952

There were whispers about those who had been imprisoned, then liberated, then recaptured, those who had to stay hidden. Children trembled in fear and adults seemed like conspirators. Rumors spread of houses searched and torched, people arrested, disappearing. One evening, I caught Grandmother praying before the Virgin with eyes the color of the ocean. "How long will this era without gods or mothers last? Holy Virgin," she asked, wiping her eyes, "When will this night of shame end?"

Sometimes we got mail. The envelopes bordered in blue and red gave us joy. Aunt Délia adjusted her glasses, read the letter to us, then put it away with the others in an old tin box. The letters always the same questions: they wanted to know if I was doing well at school, which I hated with all my heart, they promised me presents, and they wanted to know if I still had the same rebellious red mop of hair, if I was still quick-tempered and moody, crying over any little thing.

"Abroad," for me, was the magical world where fear was absent and happiness watched over our days like a sentinel. "Abroad" was immense countries, with all the rivers I had studied in my big geography book: the Saint Lawrence, the Mississippi, the Rio Grande, the Nile, the Amazon . . .

Aunt Délia was nice to me because I liked to please her. But Grandmother the Queen, she was another story. She terrorized me and I began to dream of going abroad, too -- to escape the innumerable dangers that nothing seemed able to protect us from, but above all to flee her long yellow hands that often pursued me around the house with a strap. Of course, I took my vengeance out on the cat, who suffered many forced baths, and in the evening, when it was time to light the oil lamps because of the blackouts that came more and more frequently, I hid the matches, and laughed when I heard the sound of Grandmother's rings as she groped in the darkness for a book of matches, grumbling. She hated the blackouts, because Satrapier's troops, impetuous as wild beasts, took advantage of them to commit many crimes.

One day, classes ended sooner than usual. The nuns rang the bells vigorously, practically chased us out, and then they shut the school. We dispersed like a flock of birds. We were going home by way of Combes Street, Muriel, Thérèse, and I, when we noticed an immense blazing inferno. Flames were bursting from the end of the street, and grey smoke obscured the horizon. Carefree, like children at that age are, we approached despite the noise and the sirens. We were suddenly confronted by a soldier who aimed his rifle at us, so we slipped down a side street that led to Muriel's house and, passing through a hole in the fence, we went to lie low at her house. I knew the true face of fear on that day, because, unable to return to my house, I was terrified of being scolded. I didn't know what was happening. I felt that something in me was changing. My childhood had just brutally broken its moorings.

Afterwards I learned that the gigantic flames that we had seen came from a house where ten people had been burned alive – the whole family. It was the home of a man suspected of shooting at the President's son. The President's son had not been hurt, but they arrested and imprisoned everyone they knew was trained to handle guns. The soldiers blocked all escapes from the house before setting it on fire.

The house burned down to the ground, with the children, the servants, the grandparents, and the dogs. For years, I had been taking that street to school. I knew that my childhood was buried in the ashes of that house. I couldn't keep my eyes open when I got close to it. Shivering, I kept away from the fence that separated the ruins from the street. At those times I was invaded by something inexpressible, something akin to modesty, and to a dizzying fall into an endless night. I quickened my step. The ground was darkened, and only a few cursed plants grew. I was afraid to see whitened or calcified bones. I imagined that one day the dust of those beings that had been burned, their arms, their hands, all that would come to life again, would start to grow again, would become giant trees whose long branches, like tentacles, would search out the assassins, wherever they might be, and strangle them.

That happened no more than a stone's throw from our house, and Grandmother knew the occupants of the house well. Whether it was due to her emotion or her anger, a few days later, she lay down, put her hand to her breast, called Aunt Délia, and breathed her last. She was eighty-six years old.

Very few people came to the wake. They knew the close relationship that had existed between Grandmother and the ones who had been killed. Grandmother would have cursed: "The cowardly hypocrites! So cowardly that that bastard who runs the country will eat them alive!" Grandmother the Queen wasn't afraid of soldiers. She hated them. In the last days before her death, the soldiers came to search our house often in the night. Lying on my side, I watched them through my eyelashes, coming and going in their khaki uniforms and their big boots. They turned the armoires upside down, opened the medicine bottles. Grandmother walked ahead of them, proud, armed with her trusty bunch of keys, and opened the doors of all the cabinets for them. They left empty-handed, hats under their arms, but that didn't keep them from coming back a few nights later.

The door was closed again. A gust of warm air swept into the room and the lamp's flame flickered. It was the first time I saw a dead person. To tell the truth, despite the fact that Grandmother the Queen was there, lying in the white satin of the coffin, I couldn't believe in her death. Her lips were pinched like they were when she was angry. She was dressed in a light blue dress, with a large lace collar, whipped together by Aunt Délia, who was the seamstress of the family.

In the room, people coughed and tried to stifle it. I was sure that Grandmother the Queen was pretending, in order to enjoy her triumph later, like when she snuck up on us to catch us finishing off a jar of preserves. She was doubtless listening to the neighbors whispering their condolences to Aunt Délia. She was pretending, in order to make Aunt Délia cry and to scare us. Soon, I told myself, she'll get up. It was impossible for her to be dead. It was inconceivable. What would become of this house without Grandmother? I watched Aunt Délia closely, hoping that her face would give me some clue, tell me if Grandmother was really and truly dead. Aunt's eyes were dry, her handkerchief at her lips, like on Sundays when she came back from Mass with Grandmother. Grandmother took the arm that she offered her as if it were her own, as if it were a cane. She leaned all her weight on it. Aunt tamely altered her step to match Grandmother's. Straight as an admiral as they went down the aisle of the church, Grandmother saluted her old friends on either side of her, and Aunt flashed a brief smile here and there.

At the end of several years, finally, there was only the shadow of Grandmother hovering over Aunt Délia's life. What was this house, then, that had lost its soul, and had lost even the children's laughter? Aunt Délia was terrified of foreign countries. She took the plane only once in her life, curious to see what we had become. Her visit over, she left as she had come, noiselessly.

Two days to forget

They are assassins, assassins, assa ...

I awoke with my head on fire, a nameless pain sweeping my chest and these words ramming my temples: they are assassins, assa ... a.

The room is grey, the silence hardens and absorbs me. Sleep, sleep ... the same refrain for two days, my sole companion in my distress.

Two days I've been here confined in this apartment ... as if that were enough.

I settle myself on the pillows. I light a cigarette.

The room is pitching. At the foot of the bed: *Back to Eden*, botanical medicine by Jethro Kloss. I reach out my hand. It's trembling. I don't pick up the book, I won't pick it up.

Inside it is the blue paper, the letter that I won't pick up, that I don't want to read anymore, that I won't read anymore. More than a hundred times, I have read it, reread it. Line after line, I spelled out each word, each syllable. I don't understand. Like someone blinded and terrified, I searched each line, each word for a sign, my heart delirious ... but found nothing.

I still don't understand.

I have drunk so many infusions that they have scoured and emptied my head, like my bowels.

For two days, orange flowers, lemon balm, lime, my sickness has no remedy. Thanks, Jethro. I was so famished that I devoured your book without finding a potion to calm this storm in my stomach, my abandoned and unhappy body.

Back to Eden. My room is a little boat. I am sailing without a port. Am I crying? No, it's the cigarette.

At the foot of the bed, the book watches me, cunningly becomes animate, comes towards me. There it is, I catch it, I open it, slowly, like a door being pushed gently, gently, for fear of something, there ... behind ... "Page 347: mint, chamomile, vervain -- let steep -- calms stomach pains, nervousness." And for this other pain inside me? I hear myself yell. Nothing, nothing at all.

The blue paper is there, page 347. And if ... one more time, one last time, just to see, or really, to know. Doubtless there's a sentence, a line, a word forgotten or overlooked, some detail. In Aunt Célie's narrow, nervous handwriting, there is surely something there I must find, something I must read, to finally be able to understand . . . suddenly, must . . . no. Not now. Already too late. Day is breaking. Five o'clock in the morning. In an hour, I will have to get dressed, leave my tomb, wait on the corner for the bus with all those too-wise people, those strangers who will look at me and won't see me, or rather who will pretend not to see me so as not to betray themselves.

Because they know, of course. Everyone knows. How could they not know that Robert isn't here anymore? How could they not know that we were there, together, last summer? On the porch, strong with his twenty-six years, he offered his sugar-brown torso to the sun. They know, of course, but they don't want to say that he was found dead on the porch, like that, like nothing, like a rat, his body full of holes.

It was six o'clock in the morning. Mama was going to church. Something was blocking the door. Mama pushed harder. Robert was there, behind the silent door.

The neighbors came, consoled Mama, wiped her tears, warmed her clammy hands. Everyone whispered. It seemed Adèle's son had also disappeared. And André, his body had been found in the ravine. André had been sixteen. His guitar had brightened the nights of the neighborhood. André, dead with his dreams, his little poet's body covered with white stones. Mouths whispered, anger screamed.

I take my body out of bed. It's now two days that I've been a refugee there, trying to bury my despair.

My boss was generous. "Two days to forget," he said, smiling and pushing me by the shoulders towards the exit. "Two days off, *ma belle Élise*, to get better. One never dies before one's time." The boss had spoken. The debate was closed. Life went on. Two days to forget Robert's laugh, the sounds of our childhood, the memories and the scents, Aunt Célie's letter. Two days to forget Mama, her immense pain, her grey hair and her trembling hands.

Never before one's time? I don't understand. I dress, staggering, drunk with my helplessness. Memories are teeming in me. I feel terrible.

Quickly now: I must go right away, in the métro and the bus, to tell them, to say, "Listen, listen to me, you don't know what it's like over there, you don't know anything. There was Robert and summer every day. There was life, friends, colors, laughter and music assailing our bodies. All that is over. Now the island spews curses. The island is howling, and no one listens. The future is besieged, and there is only death. They kill us every day, everyone, at any time. They kill us like nothing, like rats. Three years ago it was Papa, then the neighbor, the one with the nice beard who laughed too loudly. And after that, one night, it was Maribelle's turn, that girl who adored life but didn't like the general. On the general's order, they cut off her breasts. The day before yesterday, it was the peasants' turn, all the peasants who loved their land too much, and yesterday it was Robert, but Robert was my brother." My body is wrenched in a demented cry. "Robert was my brother ... " He loved life so much, he clung to his land, his country with all his might. When Papa disappeared, I left. But Robert said, "Wait a little longer, you'll see, they'll soon give up, the bastards." They still haven't given up, the bastards, but me, I'm going crazy.

One doesn't die before one's time? The boss is a liar. Quickly, I have to go tell him, tell all of them, in the hallways of the métro, there where the echo resounds the loudest, I have to cry that over there we all die before our time, just like that, in full daylight, like rats. We all die whenever, wherever. On a porch like Robert ... throats slit in a field like Gasner ... shot in a cemetery like Milou and Marcel, under the terrified eyes of schoolchildren rounded up for the show ... we all die of futility and torture, little by little like Mama and Aunt Célie and Uncle Max and the others ... of rage, of despair and of useless hate like me.

I go out into the frozen morning. The letter in my pocket. I will take it out soon. I will read it. Just like a wave breaking against a reef I will yell: they are assassins, assassins, assa...

Antonio's Departure

The Mass was scheduled for nine o'clock the next morning. He had asked Flore to accompany him. She'd simply shaken her head no. Her heart was so heavy that she didn't even have the strength to open her mouth anymore. Every evening when he came home for dinner, they settled into the same sullen and tense atmosphere, got tangled up in the same discussions that never went anywhere. He always found a new argument, another good reason for going to the ceremony. However, she felt the anguish was starting to get to him, too. She told herself then that, despite her fatigue, she was going to have to plead her case one last time. In a stifled voice, she hazarded, "You can tell them you were sick, indigestion, a sudden illness, you can make something up …"

"We pushed the date back three times already," Antonio replied, moving closer to Flore to trace her lips with a loving finger. "The end of the month is approaching. We can't let the last day of November go by without praying for the victims."

Her voice full of bitter anger, Flore responded, "If there's a passion you all share, it must be for creating loads of martyrs and heroes, so you can have something to celebrate. But I assure you, Antonio, I won't be strong enough to go cry over your grave."

He answered in a weary voice. "Have faith, nothing will happen to me."

"Have faith in what? Didn't they take down your brother three years ago? Can you have forgotten it was you they had their sights on?"

"Rumors," Antonio said uncomfortably. "But you know that people will say anything."

"You even admitted it," Flore retorted, wiping away a tear distractedly. "People will say anything, but they will also do anything. The most passionate of your comrades, the one that's the most loyal to you, who eats and sleeps under your roof, is the same one who'll go tomorrow to turn you in, reporting all your conversations and actions in exchange for a measly check or a few favors. Tell me one last time, idealist, do you really think that a revolution will end in triumph here, and do you think that your devoted comrades will take care of your children's education when you're dead?"

Her voice broke, and her sentence ended in a chaos of laughter mixed with sobs. Her shoulders shook as if an invisible hand pulled them by a string. Abundant tears streamed down her face. Antonio got up and, taking her by the shoulders, pulled her head to his chest. She felt her body enveloped by his large masculine hands, by his arms. Far from calming her, this feeling of well-being reawakened all her fears. Her tears redoubled.

"If you want to kill yourself, Antonio, why not just do it? Here!" she cried, disentangling herself from him with a brusque movement of her shoulders. With a bound, she ran towards the little desk by the window. "Why don't you take the revolver? There it is, in the drawer, take it!"

She looked at the gun and froze. Antonio came towards her and slowly closed the drawer.

"Do you think," he said, struggling to make his voice sound reassuring, "that we should all base our behavior on how others act, always keeping silent, keeping our eyes closed, barricading ourselves, retreating into in our fear and crawling like slugs? How can we stop all that? How can we stop trudging among ghosts, once and for all?"

He lowered his voice. “We’ve discussed the security measures at length. Nothing will happen to me. Do you trust me?”

“I don’t know anything,” Flore answered hoarsely, as if she were ready just to give up forever.

But she tried one last time: “You know very well that there’s a price on your head! They will never forgive you for rejecting their fancy drawing rooms and preferring the people they spit on. You belong to the world they abhor, to the people they hate. What can your security measures do against their machine guns? You know very well that I share your dreams, Antonio, but what is going to become of me in this situation, alone with the children?”

Antonio, motionless, was watching Flore pace the floor. Finally she collapsed on the couch, and her voice became imploring:

“Let’s leave, I beg you, Antonio, let’s get out of this country. There are flights every day, let’s leave, just for a little while.”

“No, I will not leave. If we absolutely have to, it won’t be until after the Mass. I promised I’d be there, and I will keep my promise. We have to prove to those who want to reduce us to nothing that we will not be intimidated. Nothing will happen to me, Flore,” he repeated, slowly approaching her as if he were trying to gain time. “All the comrades will be there. We will defend ourselves. They will never dare to come into the church.”

“Are you forgetting that you are holding Mass in memory of the ones who were burned alive in a church they set on fire? Are you forgetting that they went so far as to stab a pregnant woman in the stomach?”

"That's true. But it was a different church, in a poorer neighborhood. Here, they won't dare."

"You are going to die, Antonio," she cried, suddenly angry, "and you think that once you're dead, those you call your comrades will think of you?"

She was yelling now, mixing convulsive laughter with her delirious words: "Let me tell you how it will happen, Antonio."

It seemed that her voice, the words that she was spitting out came from some body other than her own. This was no longer Flore, but another woman, an actress who put on Flore's features to destroy her passion for the man who shared her life.

"When it's all over, your comrades will put on their nicest clothes to come to your funeral. Their wives will follow in their biggest hats. Under their veils, their eyes will follow me, watching for my pain. And you will have the best pallbearers, Antonio! Everyone will be fighting to be able to carry your casket, they will do it with their chests puffed up, thinking about the day when they will come knocking on my door to console me. And I tell you this right now, you can be sure that they won't have to knock for very long. You can't imagine the pleasure with which I will give myself to them, no holding back, no strings attached. I will get my revenge on you, Antonio, because now I realize that I'm the only one who believed in our love. You claim to want to honor your word, but you don't have any honor; you deceived me! While you're rotting in your grave, your dear companions will be going to meetings and symposiums demanding a few moments of silence on your behalf: I can see it now, their suitable expressions as they perform that "revolutionary" gesture. Others, certainly, will be more daring. They will clear their throats and, in the smoke of their pipes and cigars, they will be quick to profane your memory. Sententious, they will say that you were just a scatterbrain, an agitator with no ideological training. Your sacrifice will be in vain, Antonio."

Her eyes were dry now, but her anger, intact, was still evident in her agitated body. She continued to pace, moving objects around, straightening a picture frame, pushing in a chair, giving these trivial gestures the power to numb her pain, maybe even to fend off the irreparable solitude she feared. She seemed more fragile than ever. Antonio, however, kept his eyes riveted to the ground. What inexplicable hate she feels towards those that she disdainfully calls my "comrades," he thought, overcome. How generously she showers them with pitiless insults: actors, circus barkers, clowns, twisting and perverting everything they encounter. Memories came back to him of incidents which, when he thought about it, could justify her anger and her bitter words. But, he persisted, can one always anticipate the traps that human nature sets for us on a daily basis? In this kind of combat, mistakes and betrayals are unavoidable. He felt comforted, all the same, by the little voice inside him that said that it was neither insane nor reckless to fight for one's convictions.

He went over towards the window, turning his back on Flore's anger. After a moment, he turned towards her and looked at her for a long time. He's so beautiful, she thought in a sudden flash. From the first day I saw him, I knew that, for better or worse, he was going to change my life forever. She felt herself falter unexpectedly, brutally shaken by the swell of her memories. And to think that I am going to lose him, to think that tomorrow, at this same time, he won't be here, with me, in this house. I will never again see his curved back, his wide shoulders, the ease and beauty of his movements. She wanted to throw herself at his feet, to cry, "I want you to understand, I love you, Antonio!"

She held her tongue, though. The tumult inside her was too strong. In her mind, in her head, she felt sentences racing. How can I live without you? You can't, you don't have the right to deprive me of you, to deprive me of the sound of your voice, of your arms around my shoulders, of your mouth on my neck.

I've only got a few more hours, she thought, panicking, looking nervously around her, desperately searching for something to hang onto among the inanimate objects, those mute witnesses of the happiness that she was trying to dissect, whose scattered fragments she was trying to collect. I wear out my soul praying in silence that Heaven rob me of your eyes, their ecstasy, in the night, when you lean over my body. And my name, murmured, sung, by your mouth, that song, that voice that will never again sing my name . . . I wear out my heart in silence, since it is useless to tell you again that I love you. Tomorrow, at this same time, I will be here, sitting in this same place. Your chair will be empty. I will look at it, trying to sum up all the years spent with you. Will I have the strength to accept the death of all that?

Flore suddenly had the impression that she and the whole house were sinking into a pit. She looked at a picture on the wall opposite her. It was taken during their first trip, to Corfu, in that time when happiness tasted like perfection, the time when it was as vast and deep as the ocean in front of which they posed for the picture. Our happiness was made of granite and had the power of the waves. Where had she read that sentence? Antonio followed her gaze, repeating to himself the words she hadn't said.

He took her hand and led her to the window. Shoulders hunched, they looked like two worn-out boxers unable to put into words what had happened between them. It was a beautiful night. The sky had never held so many stars.

"Do you see those stars?" he asked her. "In my heart, I have as many dreams for this country as there are stars in the sky. I was only a child, I remember, and I was already absorbed in these visions. We will build, I said, schools, kitchens, cities, clean roads, parks where children can play and fly kites. Do you realize, Flore, there isn't a single park here where kids can play? We will build day-care centers, old folks' homes, universities, hospitals."

Antonio's eyes shone like the stars in the November sky, his arms making huge circles as if to embrace that site that he saw full of his dreams.

Flore sighed. Her eyes fixed on Antonio's arms, she thought of a bird's last flight above the waves. He is dreaming with his eyes open, like a child, she thought with a profound sadness. I dream too, more often than he thinks. My dreams, though, are not as nice as his. They are nothing but nightmares. Every night, I dream that he is leaving us forever and that we have nothing left but the endless emptiness that replaces him in our existence. Every night, the same dream comes to me, without respite. I am crouched in front of the church, in front of his cold body. The sadly fading daylight is the only thing keeping me company. There I am, bent over on the ground. I am crying over his body, sprawled in the middle of the street, alone and abandoned in front of the church. I hear myself yelling my pain as if I were giving birth to him. I am giving birth to that man who is everything to me, but he is dead. I scream, and the echo of my voice comes back to me as though it came from somewhere else. My voice continues to scream, "Where are your comrades now? Busy explaining that they were out in front? There you are, reddening the ungrateful earth with your blood, and they, they are in their living rooms before a rapt audience who is listening to them relate this tragedy that will soon be just an anecdote, one of many. Everyone listens attentively as they speak of you, because they are the ones who knew you well, who laughed with you and ate with you. They will tell it again and again, because they were the ones who saw everything." She had now lost all hope of holding Antonio back. She covered her face with her hands.

"I have always known that we must pursue our dreams, all the way to the end," said Antonio, with a seriousness that poorly concealed his anguish. "I will, no doubt, fail. So many others before me, as you say, have failed. But my children will be proud of me, and others will take up the torch."

"May God and my love protect you," Flore sighed.

She turned off the lamp and started towards the bedroom.

The next morning, Flore stayed in bed. She pretended to sleep, even though she hadn't been able to shut her eyes all night. Next to her, Antonio had tossed and turned, also searching vainly for sleep. More than once, she had heard him get up, go to the children's room, and like a thief, softly open the door.

She saw him get out of bed, barely moving. She imagined all his gestures. The repetitive movements of his brown hands on his body, his fingers furiously scratching his head, and that thick fleece on his chest. Back slightly stooped, which he tried to straighten. Lying on her side, eyes half-closed, she saw him get dressed, struggle to tie his tie. Normally, she was the one who took care of that. Before leaving, he paused for a long time to contemplate her figure under the sheet. On her body, she felt Antonio's burning look. The last look. It was much stronger than intuition. She knew she would never see him again. He left, closing the door slowly so as not to wake her.

The House by the Sea

The windows opened onto the beach. After the tragedy, we put up very thick curtains, let them fall shut, and always kept them closed. The sea itself will no longer be an audience to the spectacle of our unhappiness, nor to that of our deliverance. For us, it was, doubtless, another way of dispelling the shadows that stubbornly stand on the shore between us and the sea. In daytime, everything is fine. In the daily comings and goings, it's less necessary to pretend. However, as soon as the night arrives, we think of them. We also think of him, up there in Rochelle, in that little palace he built himself in the middle of the woods. The same thought comes back to me then, painful and haunting, with the same words: *Everything ended, or, rather, everything began on that Saint-Sylvestre's eve when he stopped to help a motorcyclist...*

Behind the closed windows, I live with Adrienne, my mother. We are two shadows, two ghosts, drifting along the shores of absence. We are the ashes of an existence that no one remembers anymore. Most of the families who, like us, lived through what happened on that Saint-Sylvestre's eve left, taking with them what scraps and crumbs they had left. Could they forget? Or at least find peace?

We won't leave Sapotille. When I was a child, my entire world consisted of this village, its houses with their big porches and shady courtyards. Ours, the courtyard of our house, was my kingdom. There was a pomegranate tree, with red flowers and fruits. It was my palace of marvels. There was the pond on which sailed boats that were nothing more than the leaves of trees. And the great breadfruit tree with its leaves like umbrellas. He was the king of my kingdom. All my subjects were there, my brothers, and, of course, Philippe, whom I always thought about as I straddled the branches of the pomegranate tree. That tree is still there. I part the curtains to catch a furtive glimpse of it.

When I was a child, the world was the church of Sapotille and its steeple that dominates Jacob Butte and towers above the ocean. Sapotille, whose houses are eaten away by the salt of the sea that, at high tide, grazes their flanks. Sapotille, which has always been my home, is still, for me, the world to which I have given all the love, hate and passion my heart could hold.

For Mama and me, who have nothing more to cherish, not even initials engraved on a stone in the cemetery, the streets full of potholes and the infinite murmur of the shore and its memories are all that is left; we cannot abandon them. Our memories are terrible jailers and ignoble tyrants. Since that day they have tortured us, followed us, possessed and ruled our existence. Because of them, Mama and I became mute, like stones, knowing no other language than the one they dictate.

Sometimes Mama writes. She had dreamed of being a writer, before. But in this country where there has only been room for the powerful and their insanity, Adrienne had to bury her desire for words very early. She wisely put away her notebooks and her pencils. But when the pain becomes too raw, she takes them out, dusts them off, and writes in an attempt to ease the grief that, like a malignant fever, has taken possession of her entire existence. *Everything ended, or, rather, everything began on that Saint-Sylvestre's eve when he stopped to help a motorcyclist...*

Behind the closed windows, Adrienne and I, two little islands adrift off the shores of the big island, Sapotille, that town that continues to live, to breathe, we don't know how. For a long time, we questioned, for a long time we asked ourselves how all this could have happened, and above all how we found the strength to continue. We asked ourselves, how can a human being survive so many horrors? From now on, we no longer want to dig deep into things. It is useless. There is nothing left for us to do but exist. The desire for an end that would deliver us from everything is the only thing left alive in this house that looks onto the sea. It's there, tangible, huddled into us like a child we can never put down.

The others, the ones who didn't die, all left, abandoning Sapotille to the interminable season of fear and madness. They left on tiptoe. The last to leave, Guy, the youngest child, the one they spared by accident because on that day he was asleep in the attic -- he crossed the border in women's clothing hastily slipped on. A long peasant's skirt hid his hairy calves. He had tried to stay with us. But he, too, ended by making the terrible decision: leave. Because we couldn't exorcise the past, because everyone else was dead and he was there, up there with his guards and his dogs, his pool and his horses, because we couldn't do anything, Guy could only leave. Those are the last words Guy said to us before sinking into the night of oblivion, thirty years ago already.

The one up there, his name is Philippe. Philippe Breton. I am telling you this so that, like me, you will remember. He was my fiancé; he grew up with us. With my brothers, Carl, Jacques, Guy and the others, and with me, who had loved him since . . . I don't know anymore. All I remember today, thirty years after it's all over, is what will rise in me until the last day of my life, rise from the deepest part of me, this stubborn swell that lifted me up when Philippe covered me with his breath in the attic. As a child, I was already dreaming of him in the branches of the pomegranate tree. At eighteen, I loved Philippe with that love of eighteen years that cannot be named.

As a child, playing marbles, Philippe skinned his knees on the same rocks as my sons, my mother writes. *Marisa's brothers numbered six; they scuffled with him on the way to school. They ran together on the beach, dove into the white foam of the waves, splashing each other and laughing. Often, he ate at our table at noon, next to my sons. With my oldest, Jacques, he spent entire evenings reading in the attic. So many times sleep surprised them both, exhausted, their eyelids heavy . . .*

So many times I contemplated them before resolving to wake them up, to surprise Philippe, bewildered and confused in the midst of all the books he wanted to read all at once. This library, in the attic, belonged to my father, and only Jacques and Philippe were allowed to settle in there that way. At the time, Philippe was a gentle boy, respectful, eager to please and bookish, qualities that my father, an attentive teacher, could appreciate.

"This boy will go far," Papa said, full of admiration and glancing at me surreptitiously. "Too bad Guy and Antoine aren't like him!" he went, he who endlessly deplored the unconventionality of his two youngest sons. My father, Daniel Saint-Cyrien, was also a lawyer, but he had stopped practicing because he had realized, as he liked to say, that times would never be the same, neither in Sapotille nor in any other part of the country; those who had decided to control everything were determined to transform the inhabitants of the country into spectators of their own existence.

Everything ended, or, rather, everything began on that Saint-Sylvestre's eve. I had just turned nineteen, and Philippe had just turned twenty-four. Coming back from a visit, my father, pulling out of the intersection of Quatre-Chemins, happened on a motorcyclist whose bike had broken down.

"Philippe, you, at this hour?"

"Don't come any closer, Monsieur Saint-Cyrien!" Philippe uttered in a cold and challenging voice.

Despite the darkness, my father realized not only that Philippe's eyes were bloodshot, but also that his hands and his clothes were covered with bright red. He was awkwardly trying to conceal a revolver, but my father saw the gleam of its handle in the dim light. He couldn't find the face of the intelligent and bookish Philippe he had always known. A few feet from him stood a being disfigured by hate, ready to shoot him.

"You, too, Philippe?"

"Now that you know, Monsieur Saint-Cyrien, what are you going to do?"

My father turned on his heel and left, his heart sickened by sadness and disgust. The next day, he woke up earlier than usual and spoke to my brothers and me for a long time. Mama knew already. She looked like someone condemned to death, dark circles under her reddened eyes from a sleepless night.

Without hedging, Papa told us about Philippe and people like him that were being recruited all over the country and trained to kill. He explained to us their role in the climate of terror that had crashed down on Sapotille and the entire country. "The fetid stench of corruption, of crime and of uncountable betrayals has, from this point, invaded our homes," he concluded. "A day will come when these people will, without hesitation, eat their own mothers' flesh."

For a while already, Philippe, on the pretext of having to prepare for exams, had only been coming to visit rarely. "I knew," my father said, "that his desertion was hiding something strange, but I prayed to heaven, hoping like an idiot, that everything that was being whispered about him was only slander . . ." He looked me straight in the eyes. We had said everything we needed to say to each other.

From that moment, a confusion of distress and rage replaced the blood in my body. I lived with the feeling of a thick shadow spreading over my heart. My brothers, nervous, came into my room stealthily, bringing me news. We spoke in low voices. They had already lost several of their friends. Nobody knew if those who had disappeared were in prison or if they had been killed. They simply weren't there anymore. Their relatives, when they hadn't also been taken, barricaded themselves, frightened, not knowing where to go or who to talk to. Like us, they were waiting at home, trembling every time a truck passed in the night.

They came in the middle of the night, armed to the teeth. Some of them wore black hoods. Was Philippe among them? I didn't want to know. I will never forget Mama's desperate look, the handkerchief she shoved into her mouth to keep herself from screaming. They took Jacques, Daniel, Carl, Victor, and Antoine, and, of course, Papa. "We are just going to drive you to the police station, ask you some questions." We knew that no one who was taken ever came back, but we clung to the commander's words.

How many days and nights passed? None of them came back, until that day . . . that crowd on the beach, the floating scraps of shirts, swollen and unrecognizable bodies that the sea vomited up. The inhabitants of Sapotille, sobbing mothers, came running to the beach to try to identify the bodies. Adrienne and I stayed at the window. The sun on the sea that day was the color of blood.

How can I describe the tumult and the screams that rose from the beach? How can I describe the chaos that has been a part of our lives ever since?

Late in the night, the last women returned to their homes. Silent, they climbed Jacob Butte and went forth with the sea's voice in their heads like a siren. Then everything stopped, the days, the hours . . . and we were settled in for good, Mama and I, in the dizziness of absence, in front of the sea that we never stopped questioning.

In the daytime, when market noises and the echoes of a life pretending to have forgotten reach us from the village down below, in the daytime, in the tumult of everyday life, we also pretend. But when the evening comes, especially with the approach of Saint-Sylvestre's eve, every sound, every movement, every flash of light reveals to us the infernal carousel of living dead and ghosts that will forever haunt Sapotille and our little house by the sea.

Silence Like Blood

Fifth day

Dear Claire,

If I write you, it's just to keep the promise I made you, and not to tell you what I am seeing, as you asked me, because all I can see is what is shown to me. I'm sure this letter will be disjointed and very long. I can't help it. I'll try, however, to put my whole soul into it, even though I know that I'll have a hard time breathing life into the words, which will be, I predict, powerless to translate the feeling of strange emptiness that has been living in me since I got here. I can already see them lining up on the paper, stiff, immobile, and impassable. Like a child building a dream little by little, I insist on putting them away, moving them around, trying to appeal to them, to beg them to live. I persist in making them sacred caretakers, guardians of my illusions, since that is all I have left. I lost everything when I retraced my steps.

Most people I meet start, before even saying hello, by asking me this question: "When are you going back home?" It's not good to stay too long here, it seems; nothing is quite the same anymore. Not even the people. They are rather ... how can I explain it? … somewhere between dogs and wolves, as they say, between a life that can be seen in the daylight and something that hides its face in the shadows, and I have the awful feeling that they all share, without knowing it, something closed, a secret whose shape I can't even guess. I feel myself wandering as if I'm in a maze, and I don't know anymore where the landmarks or the beacons are. In living rooms, mistrust takes up the space that should be occupied by camaraderie; a new code, made of sounds that seem to be molded out of some light, airy plastic, has taken the place of language.

Speaking of wolves and dogs, I was the laughingstock of the group yesterday at a party that my hosts organized to celebrate my “return.” They had invited people that I knew more or less by name. “You absolutely must meet these people,” they told me. Neither on the left nor the right, but just militants, they were careful to explain, looking at me as if they expected me to have some sort of comment about it. People who are involved “in the democratic sphere,” as they say here.

Women and men drank heavily, smoked and made pronouncements, hitting the table loudly to make themselves heard – because they were all talking at the same time – standing up to launch into long tirades and talk about their exploits. I am writing you all this thinking particularly of a poet who was there. He arrived encumbered by two boxes full of his books that he then tried to sell. He was, he announced with a haughty air, on his twentieth collection of poems, and his poetry was so popular abroad that it had even been translated into Esperanto. A whimsical spirit, he sailed blindly through the ages, claiming to have known Gorky and smoked Havanas in the Sierra Maestras with Che. His eyes vague when he wasn’t talking about his writings and his travels, he wore his extravagant cowboy hat all evening. From time to time, he blinked his eyes, cleared his throat, and honored the assembled crowd with a line of Mallarmé, a quote from Hegel or from Kant. He ended panting, which was surely due to his imposing mass, straightened his hat and poured himself a glass of rum, while the crowd energetically approved. He told about having toured the world, walking on the banks of the Seine and the Volga, into whose waters he had considered throwing himself one night when his heart suffocated under the weight of nostalgia. He had made love, he said, to girls with eyes of all colors, and he wrote a thesis on the theme of silence in writings by Mallarmé, who he referred to as his father. “I retraced the path, but backwards, after thirty years of exile and wandering," he concluded. Since he got back, he has held a position as cultural counselor in the new government.

I tried then to tell these people how, since my arrival, I had been worried about the bands of dogs roaming the streets. The guests looked at each other, dumbfounded, and collapsed with laughter all at once. A lanky kid rolled on the floor holding his sides. "You think we have time to worry about dogs?" said a woman who looked like a knife blade. Her face had a beveled edge, and she had immense eyes that could have been beautiful, but that had forgotten everything about beauty. I detected a great deal of hostility in her eyes and in her voice. Slumped in an armchair in front of me, she was distractedly caressing the breast of her companion, seated on a cushion at her feet. "Shut up!" she cried suddenly, authoritatively, to the others who were continuing to laugh. In one sudden gulp, she swallowed the contents of her glass. "I want to hear our friend's theory about the dogs," she finished, snapping her lighter shut and slowly and deliberately blowing a stream of smoke from her cigarette.

"I think," I continued, "that the dogs will soon take control here. You will soon be ruled by the dogs. You don't seem to notice it, but the dogs, here, aren't the same anymore. They have clearly undergone a profound mutation." Some guests now seemed to be paying more attention to me. "Just look at the packs of dogs you encounter after nightfall. Where are they going, in groups like that, disciplined and silent? They are having secret meetings, and do you know why? They have learned that the humans they are living with are nothing but decomposing sides of meat, only good for staving off boredom. They have realized that the power of these people who claim to be their masters, those bones that hold them up, can, with simple pressure of the jaws, be reduced to nothing. Do you not know the number of bodies the dogs ate at Titanyen alone? That never should have happened. Since I came back, I have been watching them, and everything tells me that they are getting ready to sound your death knell." The instant I finished my sentence, I saw the poet give a questioning look to the hostess, and then, raising his index finger to his temple, sign to her that something was wrong with my head. I followed up by describing to them a scene I had witnessed the very evening of my arrival. "Because of the torrid heat and the humidity that night, I had a hard time sleeping. It must have been about midnight when I went out onto the balcony in back of the house. Believe it or not, just under the canopy that shelters the stand of that woman who sells the peanuts, there was a large assembly of dogs. In all my life, I have never seen anything like that."

You, too, must be asking yourself if I've completely lost my marbles. Rest assured, dear Claire, they are still there, but I don't know how long they'll stay. "I saw those dogs; there must have been about thirty of them. They were sitting there in orderly rows, their tails straight, their ears pricked, all their attention concentrated on an old crop-eared mutt perched up on a flat rock. At first I just stood there, astonished. Then my body froze with terror as I saw the crop-eared mutt shake his head in a series of brusque and jerky movements. I understood that it was a signal when I saw those thirty dog heads turn towards the balcony, towards me. Thirty pairs of absolutely furious eyes were fixed on me. At the same instant, a low growling ran through the group. In the darkness, their sharp fangs and their pupils gleamed like so many shards of glass. The crop-eared mutt leapt up on his heavy paws and, followed by the whole pack, headed towards the highway." At this point in my story, I felt the audience becoming nervous bit by bit. Someone got up to open the window. Once again, the power was out and the fans weren't working anymore.

Everyone searched for a bit of cardboard to make little fans for themselves. I don't know which was causing the guests more discomfort, my story or the heat. However, since the audience was still not saying a word, I continued: "The strongest of the animals had taken the lead. There was no sign of the lolling tongues shiny with drool like they have during the day, nor of the submissive air of mangy hounds that drag their misery everywhere. They looked like wild beasts that had freed themselves from humans. On the road, in the night, walking in tight rows, they were undoubtedly going to a more isolated meeting place."

The audience staying silent; I left to get some fresh air on the terrace. When I got back, I found the guests a bit less excited than at the beginning of the evening, because they had realized that I didn't represent a real "challenge" to them. They were tapping their feet to the latest American hits on the radio that were interspersed with *rasin*[3] music. The girl with the trim mahogany body was standing politely with her hand on her hip. She gave me a sultry look. I found a spot next to a couple on a sofa and asked the group if someone could tell me how to get to Titanyen, or, even better, drive me there, because I wanted to go take some photos.

Suddenly, the room emptied. The pâtés, canapés and petits fours that the maid had just brought sat on the tables until morning.

Seventh day

To please me, my hosts took me for a walk on the mountain, where the big houses are perched, the ones that look like they belong in the white suburbs of Johannesburg. Up there, there are enormous villas surrounded by big stone walls topped with barbed wire. On the immense lawns, trimmed by gardeners armed with pruning shears, you can see nannies in white aprons and bonnets, playing with the children.

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[3] Local music.

Pastor Willis' estate is on that mountain. My hosts explained to me that it consists of a school with a cafeteria, a community clinic, a store, and even a restaurant where they serve what some call the best hamburgers in the country, with beef imported from overseas. I asked them if they knew that some rich countries had sold their entire stock of beef contaminated with Mad Cow disease to poor countries. They answered me with a quip: "Now we can't say that humans hold the monopoly on madness anymore." Then, wanting to seem more serious, they started telling me, uttering cries in which I tried to detect indignation, that in the clinic that Willis manages, a team of doctors sterilizes women without them knowing, telling them they are being vaccinated against AIDS, and that most of the peasants from the surrounding area serve as guinea pigs for all kinds of medicines. That's what people are saying, they were careful to specify, as if to tell me it was some kind of privileged information. But the pastor, they continued in a convinced tone, had helped the area all the same. He built a school, a home-economics center where they taught girls sewing, embroidery, culinary arts. He put together a workshop for painters and other artists. He buys their works and resells them in his store. Also, he was the one who built the two roads that led up to his land, which are useful for the whole community and, of course, kept in good shape.

"I have heard that they were organizing meetings of death squads in a room of his church, and that a number of youths in the region were arrested on the basis of one phone call from him. It's also claimed that he always carries a revolver on his person."

He stammered, "I don't know anything about that," as she protested, "That's not surprising at all, since most people here have guns. Some of the Catholic priests carry guns, too, and have always been buddy-buddy with the soldiers." They didn't say another word. She scowled in a corner and he brusquely pushed the gas pedal, making the Jeep jump.

He's Jean-Christophe. As an agronomist, he's been employed for ten years by a foreign company to work on some project in the paddy fields in the Northwest, the part of the country where there's a rampant famine so bad that the people are eating limestone dipped in cane sugar syrup. He endlessly boasts about having never set foot in that hellhole and is happy enough to just fill out the reports that no one ever reads and to cash his checks.

And she's Jane. A very old friend. She has spent a lot of time abroad, which is how we ran into each other again. So it happened that we spent entire evenings trying to remember old times, vainly searching, almost desperately, for what tied us together. She told me stories about this classmate who had married a former torturer who, according to the rumor, had had his father killed, and about another classmate who had paid for her medical school by going around with all the sons of daddies with fat wallets. She always ended our conversations by saying that after all "we are all free to choose our own punishment." After finishing her studies in literature and sociology, she returned for good, her head full of theories, churning out magic formulas that, according to her, could save the country from collapse.

"We're pretty close to Willis' place now," she announced a bit later, right as the Jeep rounded a tight corner. She gave me a look that she meant to be complicit, as if to incite me to be a bit more conciliatory. I turned my head and absorbed myself in the contemplation of an uninteresting countryside: spiny cacti and bare mountains overhanging immense cliffs.

We drove around in a circle three times, looking for a place to park among the gleaming Mercedes and the luxury SUVs. A young man of about twenty, a makeshift hunter, finally ran after a van that was leaving its spot to hold it for us, in the hope that we would give him some change. Jean-Christophe parked the car and got out, spitting at the feet of the guy who just barely dodged the spray. Then he left ahead of us, taking large strides.

My surprised gaze went from place to place throughout the crowd. At every step I stumbled on the gravelly path, several times barely avoiding colliding with people. Like on a carousel, I watched a motley fauna mill about, dressed in designer summer clothes, covered in jewels and glitz. A toothless old woman stopped me and signaled, gesturing to her mouth full of blackened stumps and to her stomach, that she was hungry. Her open mouth was like a dark abyss. I stopped, taken aback, and then hurriedly and clumsily tried to open my purse. Jane pulled me violently by the arm, muttering that I was acting like I was drunk.

In the middle of a cloud of dust, stirred up by the incessant coming and going of race cars, people laughed and complimented each other on their latest purchases. The exhalations of the finest perfumes mixed with the mildewy smell emitted by the rags of the numerous beggars and with the acidic odor given off by the bodies of the servants charged with carrying the packages to the cars.

"Rule number one," Jane told me, "stop staring at people. You're attracting attention. Which is totally unnecessary, since you can tell just by looking at you that you're not from here." I was flabbergasted. She tried to backpedal, stammering and getting impatient: "I mean, you know what I mean. People can tell right away, from the way you look at everything like you're from the moon, that you haven't been here in a while. Your stiff walk, your stooped back, the way you bend your shoulders show that you are from a country where the cold curves you down toward the ground. Watch the women," she told me, "look at them: do you see the way they sway their hips and carry themselves upright?" She knew that she had just scored a point and she continued quickly so I wouldn't have time to reply. "Rule number two: never give anything to anyone in the street. Not even to children. You'll only get trouble. Find another way to be charitable."

To change the subject, I asked her, "Did they build it a long time ago? I mean, this whole thing, the store, the restaurant?"

"I don't remember. To me, it's like it was always here. On the other side, there's a tennis court and a swimming pool. We go there sometimes, Jean-Christophe and I."

Then she added in a detached tone, "Normally, there aren't as many people here. But it's Christmas soon. People are coming to get Christmas trees, poinsettias and presents."

"Christmas trees? That's one of the new customs they imported?"

"Christmas trees and poinsettias have always existed, as far as I know!"

"Where do they come from?"

"From abroad! Like the shoes and the clothes for the poor people, the rice, the fish, the chicken with hormones, Amway products, toxic waste, drugs and all the rest!"

The last words got lost in the din of horns and tires tearing on the asphalt as a brand-new convertible sports car driven by a young man came charging towards us. Jane just had the time to pull me aside by the sleeve.

She shrugged her shoulders and ran to join Jean-Christophe, who was already at the entrance to the store. She whispered something to him. With their Bermuda shorts, their Adidas shoes and their dark glasses, they looked like two wealthy tourists. He had surely read my thoughts. He shot me a look charged with rancor, while she came skipping back to me. All smiles, she said, "We're going to go get a bite at the restaurant. We'll catch up with you at the exit. You'll have time to shop. If you don't find anything you like at Willis', come join us and have a Coke. There are nice things there, go!" She pushed me in the direction of the store.

And yes, at Missié Willis' (as the employees call him sometimes) bazaar, there were souvenirs for tourists, little wooden figurines, paintings. A bakery and deli section, where there was an impatient crowd, offered exorbitantly priced delicacies.

They also sold fancy embroidered dresses, blouses, tablecloths. After walking around the store once, I asked a saleslady to show me several blouses and all the dresses. Used to obeying, she got them out and unwrapped them quickly. The pastor then hurried over, fawning, over-attentive, hovering around me. I had to make a superhuman effort not to chase him away with a wave of my hand, as one chases a fly. After a moment, he sent the saleslady away. He had clearly taken me for a wealthy tourist, or even for the mistress of one of the country's gang leaders. He spoke to me in English. Without even looking at him, I asked him to bring out everything else he had behind the counter. One after another, without really knowing what I was doing, unable to stop myself, I unfolded the tablecloths, scattering the boxes and packaging on the floor. "It's nice work," the pastor kept saying, with an expression and tone of voice more and more perplexed, "as soon as we get them in, they sell out," he continued, rambling. "All embroidered by hand! Nothing like the ones from China, where it's all machine-made."

I continued unfolding tablecloths, losing myself in the plastic wrappers and the boxes. I asked him if this nice work had been done by his wife or by his children. He took a step back, disconcerted.

"No," he said, "I have a team of workers, good seamstresses. You don't want to try anything on, Ma'am, Miss? The dressing room is right here. Anita, come carry the lady's clothes!"

"No," I told him, "Don't bother."

For several minutes, I felt, my dear Claire, that I was losing my mind. Each of my movements seemed to be speeding up its departure, through my pores, by my breath. Then I felt surging in me rage and something else that felt like hate. I was afraid the mad desire to kill could be read in my eyes. I went quickly to the bakery counter and bought an enormous tart filled with hazelnut cream, and I went out. I hurriedly left Willis' bazaar and crossed the street. I found an old tree stump, polished by the years like a stone. I sat there and unwrapped the pastry. Like a starving animal, I sank my teeth into the crust, and swallowed without really tasting it. What can be done against nameless stupidity, against the organized power of the criminal element, against those who, like Pastor Willis, think they have the right … that they were put on this earth to be what they are, and others … well, others were put here to serve as guinea pigs, doormats, cannon fodder, maids and *nègres*[4]. I was angry at Pastor Willis and at everyone he represented, and I was angry at myself for being so stupid, so fragile and so powerless.

It had taken me no time at all to devour a tart that ten people could have shared. (Later that night, I would bitterly regret that gratuitous act, but I consoled myself with the thought that it was better to have chosen indigestion than hysteria.)

My behavior had plunged Pastor Willis into a state of great excitement; he followed me outside. He stood on the steps of the store and wiped his forehead, staring at me as I devoured the tart. He looked at me as if he had had a run-in with a ghost. All of a sudden, he undid the collar of his shirt, freeing his neck, a mass of soft, red and abundant flesh. Beneath the heat of the sun, his starched shirt sparkled. A little group of curious people had gathered next to him. Among them was the toothless woman who had stopped me earlier. Knots held together the bits of dirty cloth that covered her bony body. Perched like that on the steps of the store, she looked like a scarecrow that had survived a cyclone.

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[4] Literally "black people." Similar words in English carry heavier connotations than this, which implies not only slavery but also the societal divide between Creole-speaking blacks and French-speaking mulattos.

Jane and Jean-Christophe had left me in the store to shop at my leisure, like one would leave a bewildered tourist in front of a display of exotic trinkets. After eating their hamburgers and drinking their Cokes, they came to get me. Jane asked me why I insisted on leaving so soon, but really they were praying that I would move my departure date forward. An immense burst of laughter, “koua koua koua koua koua,” split the silence that had fallen on the crowd of curious people, stuck together like a mass of worms. “Here people laugh at anything,” Jane declared.

Tenth day

The vendors were walking down towards the edge of the sea, their cracked heels digging into the dust and the pebbles. Some of them dragged behind them two or three potbellied kids, already dirty. The sun hadn’t even risen yet. I had decided to take some pictures of the island waking up. The country is so beautiful in the morning, at dawn. In every city, in every country, everywhere in the world, there is an unspoilable purity at dawn. Every place on earth looks like every other place at the break of day. Dawn is so full of light and promises. This morning, trembling like a veil of silver mist, dawn gracefully spread across the crests of the mornes[5]. Little by little, the streets filled with people. Before me, the city opened like a seashell under the warmth of the sunbeams. People emerged from alleys and passages. Cries, clamor, yelling, swearing and cocky laughter filled all the space. Men covered with sweat struggled to haul or push carts full of goods and merchandise. Dogs and pigs fought over piles of garbage. A deafening music added its final note of cacophony to the whole mess.

I walked all day, taking streets at random, but always going down towards the lower part of the town. At noon, I ate at the edge of the sea, squatting in front of a vendor who runs a restaurant under a canopy of lanatier straw. I ate as if I was possessed by dozens of famished phantoms, taking extreme pleasure from gnawing the little bones of a salted pig's tail that went delightfully with rice with black mushrooms and an eggplant purée. She served it all on a banana leaf. I felt like I owed her my life after that meal. She told me that she was fifty-six years old, and that she started working at the age of four, when she helped her mother, who had been a seller at a *fritay*[6] all her life, too.

"I raised two boys in this business, *ma belle dame*," she told me proudly, wiping her round shiny ebony face with the edge of her greasy apron. "As you see me now, I will be all night. I don't get home until about midnight, just to start again, tomorrow, when the rooster crows."

"Are you married?" I asked her, not really knowing what to say.

She showed her toothless gums, shaking with a laugh that nearly tipped her over backwards. Her heavy breasts jumped inside her tight blouse. I caught this phrase between two peals of laughter: "*Sa m bay mouche gason regle pou mwen a mes ages? Adje mesanmi!*" (What would I do with a man at my age and with everything I have already seen of life?")

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[5] Hill; this meaning of the word is particular to Haitian geography.

[6] Fried food booth or restaurant.

After my copious meal, I went into the church, the cathedral. The square in front of the church is always full of poor people wrapped in rags that look like they are coated with tar. They don't move. I don't know if they're sleeping. Next to them, a rusty old pot patiently accepts offerings. I wondered if they were the same beggars that were there when I was a child, or if others have replaced them, in the same tar-coated rags. Inside, I recognized the rancid odor of the tallow that drips from the candles and, in the side chapels, the same saints in white, pink, and grey stone. They have lost all their mystery. On the cross, a bloody Christ with a greenish face was showing his ribs. The red was flaking off Saint Anne's lips. Kneeling, their arms crossed, people prayed in murmurs. I lingered around the church for a long time. In the old square, in the shade of a tree that spread its blood-red flowers indifferently, I sat all afternoon. I had a sentence in my head; I don't know where it came from, but it came back to me ceaselessly: Don't search too hard through the furrows.

Eleventh day

A muddy lane lined with huts made of cob. To keep the cardboard that serves as a roof in place, stones are placed here and there. Between two huts, a child, all grey with dust, is fanning in a hole-filled metal stove a few embers that seem to want to die for good. He's crouching, and between his legs hangs a little crumpled thing. An albino dog, skinny and full of ticks, scratches itself furiously, then starts circling the child, sniffing his little behind. The child's hair and eyes are the same color as the dog's fur. With extraordinary force, he whacks the dog with a stick that has magically appeared in his hand. The dog has only three legs. It yelps in pain, bares its fangs, then changes its mind and runs off without looking back. The child looks at me and pulls instinctively at his shirt to cover the little hanging thing.

"Féfé, is the fire lit yet?" yells the nagging voice of an old woman through the window. "You want me to whack you?"

Féfé purses his lips to blow, leans over the fire, buttocks in the air, and blows, blows, blows again.

Twelfth day

Today, too, I wandered down all the passages and the little smelly alleys in the lower part of town. I walked like the others -- at least, I tried to be just like them, as if my entire future depended on the burning asphalt, the journey with no destination, the other pedestrians and their dogs. I walked until my lungs were completely full of the pestilence of the sewage. Then I went into a funny little one-room house where they served quick meals and fruit juices. There I ordered a bowl of soup and a papaya juice. To get in, I had to step over the displays of the vendors crouched in front of the door. "Go on then, *ma petite chérie*," they said, piling up the fruits and vegetables between their open legs.

A galvanized metal counter, six little tables and some rickety chairs. From behind a yellowed silk-paper screen, one could clearly hear the sounds of a couple engaged in lovemaking. Between the din of van tires squealing on the pavement, the cries of porters and of vendors, the customers seated in the room were swallowing their meals. "Yvonne, shut your mouth and hurry up and finish!" the boss screamed as she set a bowl of pumpkin soup on the canvas-covered table in front of me, steaming. I acted like everyone else. My head down, I swallowed my soup, paid, and left. I can see you laughing, Claire, you're right, it's the best thing to do.

I walked until sunset. I was totally worn out when I decided to follow the same path back again. My hosts welcomed me with reprimands: "Anything could happen to you, you shouldn't go looking for trouble!"

Red and ochre streaks crossed the sky at the horizon. The sunsets here are so beautiful they seem magic. The twilight and the night are as wrapped in mystery and passion as the dawn is pure and immaculate. If the day wears out the body, the nights on *Belle-Ile*[7] wear out the soul, sometimes even to the point of taking it over.

I went back up a little street bordered with small houses, all of which had porches and roofs decorated with delicately worked wood. They were all painted lively colors: fuchsia, absinthe green, canary yellow. Here and there, thickets of calla lilies and buttercups of gold and silver seemed to be mocking the thistles and my troubles. Tenacious, the bougainvillea clung to the walls despite the bits of broken glass and barbed wire they covered with their violet, red, and yellow flowers. Their shopping bags on their shoulders, their steps springy, women hurried to get home to prepare the evening meal. The spicy scent of beans simmering mixed with the acrid odor of the smoke that filled the small courtyards. At an intersection, around a table placed underneath a mango tree, a group of men seated on tattered chairs and upside-down gas cans played dominos and called all kinds of things at the women who passed, neither seeing nor hearing them. The air was marked by the scents gleaned from all around throughout the day. As in earlier times, little boys and girls droned their lessons for the next day on the doorsteps: "What is an island? An island is land surrounded on all sides by water." Eyes half-closed, I walked and thought about how here, there is always a kind of persistent gentleness that the daily sounds bring. And the breeze is always so faithful. The children's words were echoing. As the evening progressed, the pregnant odor of jasmine began to spread, settling in the air. The children's voices followed me down the street: "*Belle-Ile* is a land surrounded by water on all sides."

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[7] Haiti. Literally "Beautiful Island."

Twentieth Day

I finally went to Titanyen. A neighbor told me how to get there. Those who haven't ever gone to a clandestine cemetery, felt the looks of the tortured on their back, can never know. Obstinately, one persists in wondering why and wanting, o misery, to put the features of a face and the contours of a history onto a skull forgotten by the bulldozers. At the smallest crackle of burnt twigs, I thought I was snapping bones.

After that I stayed shut up in my room for several days, haunted by grimacing specters. During those days, I felt caught in a trap, suffering from insanity. My hosts were furious, resenting me for it, but they were also very worried. Maria told me that. She's the only one who comes to see me. Maria was born a maid. She was a maid before she was born. In her mother's stomach, already, well before her first cry, she was a maid. Her mother had her when she was working as a servant at Jean-Christophe's grandmother's house. After she learned to walk, Maria learned the submissive, calm motions of maids, and then she learned to give everything in silence, without expecting anything in return. Maria could be my grandmother, but, too busy being a maid since her birth, she never had children. She squints her narrow eyes, which are now nothing more than slits. Grey locks of hair escape her headscarf. She smells like castor oil and camphor. To soothe the pains of the body, old women rub themselves with camphor at night. The pain of the soul they have learned to master without help, as one learns to walk and to speak. When Maria leans over, I am afraid I'll hear her bones snap. She is dry like a little pitch pine statuette. I asked her her age, and she told me she had never been to school and therefore never learned to count the years. I tell her she is the same age as the stars, and that when one day her body won't be able to work anymore, she'll simply sit down and rise up there to wink in the middle of the night. I open the door when I hear the dragging sound of her worn-out shoes in the hallway, "shui, shui, shui." She puts her hand on my cheek. A little hand, all rough and cracked.

"*Pitit mwen, ou pa ta bwè yon ti soup pen? Mwen fè l espre pou ou. La bon pou ou, wi.*" (Child, you don't want a little bit of bread soup? I made it just for you. It would be good for you.)

"No, Maria. I'm too sick."

"*Peyi sa a va touye w, pitit mwen. Mwen renmen w anpil, men si w ale, la pi bon pou ou. Kilè w prale? Ou pa gen lestonmak pou bagay sa a.*" (This country is going to kill you, child. You know I love you, but when are you going home? You don't have the strength for this kind of thing.)

It seems I had a fever for several days and that I was delirious. Jane told me you called. Of course, I was lying down. She thinks I'm exaggerating and doesn't understand what is so distressing to me. This morning, I finally dared to look at myself in a mirror. I had the impression of being an old boat whose sail has been patched up a thousand times, ready to fall apart at the smallest gust of wind. My hosts want me to go as soon as possible. I won't go, not right away, I'm not strong enough. I feel like I'm being burned alive. Nothing is equal to the intensity of the inferno that is consuming me; I am suffering from a strange fever, and, as soon as I doze off, I dream of terrifying things.

Twenty-third day

A friend who knew I was at Jane's proposed a weekend at the beach. The sea, and the resolute hope that she rolls day and night in the folds of her tunic, reconciles me a bit to *Belle-Ile*. The countryside is fairylike. To the left, mornes, mornes, and more mornes. They are just as stubborn as the ocean; they have an air of unshakability, of knowing secrets that they would never tell even if they were dynamited. I like the assurance of the mornes. To the right, the sea. Lazy, she is spread out like an enormous jellyfish. She ruminates, spits and tosses with little effort the wrack and the twigs that accumulate in her open maw. A cove with pinkish-grey sand, the rustling of a mongoose or a *margouillat* across the dry leaves of a dwarf coconut tree ... almost paradise. And yet, I am still nursing my pipe dreams. In front of the sea, I become certain that we can never know anything of happiness but its spatterings.

Twenty-fifth day

I spent both days of that weekend at the sea lying on the beach, my head in the clouds. Muriel is so nice and thoughtful. One can see that she is one of the ones who has known long suffering, mute and discreet.

The wind and its squalls furrowed the ocean; a gentle sadness furrowed my soul. Muriel confesses to living the life of a hermit, to escape the evil that one can take in to the point of losing one's sanity. "I chose to stay," she confided in me, "not because it was better that way, but because I decided it wasn't worth it to go too far. Here like elsewhere, I am and

I will be a gypsy." We spent the last night on the beach listening to Melina Mercouri, who you love, Chavela Vargas, Pauline Julien and Irène Papas.

Twenty-eighth day

Pushed by the wind, the clouds are moving, jostling each other, intermingling, tumbling, and seeming to play leap-frog. Sometimes they run so fast, it seems like they are carrying with them what illusions I had left.

I am alone in the house. My hosts have gone out, reassured. I told them I will be leaving in a few days. I don't know if I'll go straight to the airport or if I'll find a hotel room to try to get better before I go.

Towards the beginning of the afternoon, I went out. I dressed in white. I took a basket, put a scarf over my hair, and followed the road. I gathered marigolds, buttercups, violets, pink laurel flowers and hibiscus in abundance. I found all these flowers along my path, and I even found a camellia bush. Do you remember how surprisingly beautiful that flower is? As a child, I called it princess-flower, because of its folded corolla that, to me, looked like a lace skirt of an almost unreal white. I was disappointed that they couldn't be eaten, so I decorated my pigtails with them. Sometimes I would hold them in the palms of my cupped hands, like a treasure. Quickly, they became rusty colored, as though their beauty had to stay just out of reach. I thought that in fading, they were punishing me for having picked them. They stained my fingers with their white sticky milk. Camellias' blood is white, like their lace skirts. I hated myself for having picked them, and I would've done anything to be able to reattach them to their stems. But I found them irresistible, my hands were drawn to them despite myself.

With my bouquet, I went along the dirt road, and, from there, I took for the second time the little van that goes to Titanyen. It was a Sunday, and I couldn't, as I did the first time, go unnoticed. There were crowds of people everywhere. It was almost as if I had called ahead to announce my arrival. They ran up and, struck with stupor, they stood by the fences, watching me.

Behind a pile of garbage and rusting sheet metal, I saw a puny little girl coming towards me, knee-high to a grasshopper. She said to me, in a rattling voice, "If you want, if you give me dollars, I can take you. I've taken tourists before. I can show you where they put the most bodies."

Agile like a little animal, the girl went around the mountain of garbage and reappeared on the other side. She motioned to me with her head. I followed her. "It's over there, behind the red sand quarry, at the bottom, near the ravine. If you want, I can take you." I told her that I knew the way. She stared, wide-eyed, backed away, and ran off.

I hadn't ventured so far the first time. I saw in places here and there mounds topped with a wooden cross where a name had been written in paint or sometimes in charcoal. At the indicated spot, I was seized by an overpowering shiver. The breeze started to rustle the brush strangely. I was afraid I'd hear, from under the earth, groans and sobs, but there was only the raucous cry of the black birds that, in the sky and the tops of the acacias wheeled tirelessly: caw ... caw ... caw ... All the same, I took the time to place the flowers in rings atop several of the mounds and, for the first time in several years, I prayed: "God, if You are listening, have pity."

The eternal breeze, always light and warm, ricocheted off the mountains. Before going back on the little path that leads to the road to take the van the other direction, I stopped to look at the bay. From there, I could see the whole city.

Getting out of the van, I approached a young girl I had glimpsed several times in the neighborhood. I told her hi. I felt a pressing need to talk to her before facing my hosts and the reproving silence that always surrounded them in my presence.

"Are you coming home from work?" I asked her.

"First of all, you shouldn't ask questions of strangers," she responded in a mischievous tone. Secondly, almost no one works on Sundays."

"There could be people who work on…"

She interrupted me. "How long did you stay back there? You seem ... strange. Are you a journalist?"

"All I want is to know the truth."

"You're really naïve," she flung at me, with a little joyous laugh that tinkled like a bell.

She leaned against a tree and I could tell from her relaxed face that she wanted to chat, too.

"I've read a lot about Québec," she said point-blank.

"How do you know?"

"Nothing in particular. The way you talk, maybe. Have you lived there long?"

"So long that I don't count the years anymore."

"We could keep telling each other riddles for a long time," she said.

Suddenly on tiptoes, she plucked a pod from a tamarind tree whose branches curved, offering its generous bunches of fruit. I asked her name.

"Soledad," she replied.

"That name is unusual for around here."

"When people say that about my name, my mother always says that habits, what's usual and unusual, it's like people. The things that are usual get old and die, and then we replace them with others. And you? Do you have a name?" She laughed again, and I didn't understand why.

"I'm Mnémosyne."

"You must admit that that isn't very common either. You see this pod of fruit, Mnémosyne?" She turned the pod over and over in her hands, absorbed by a thought she couldn't quite articulate.

"Why did you say earlier that I'm naïve?"

"Because . . ." she frowned in her effort to find an answer. "I have seen you coming and going for several days: in the courtyard, on the road, everywhere, on the morne, you seem to be on the lookout for something."

I was stunned, and she was delighted by my trouble. Opening her hand, she said to me, "Look at this, I'm sure you've forgotten what this is. It's called tamarind. Each person who sees it, each person who tastes it can see in it what they want, can guess what's hidden under the skin. My mother says that this country is built of sand. At the exact moment when we think we're finally going to have something to hold onto, pftt! It disappears in front of our eyes, swallowed by the sand. So we stay there, arms dangling."

I thought about this for a few seconds and then asked her, "You think they killed very many?"

"I don't know. Only the night can say, only the night was witness. But the night has learned to keep quiet, too."

"Most of them were your age, Soledad. Don't you think the assassins should be judged and punished? We should find out the truth, don't you think?"

She still didn't answer. I insisted, afraid that she would leave or shut herself up again, sensitive: "Tell me, Soledad, except for the rich, I mean the ones who barricade themselves up there behind walls and barbed wire, all the others still seem to be maroons[8] who are singing the eternal song of an impossible land. I hadn't yet left *Belle-Ile*, I was still a child when all this started."

"You took flowers to Titanyen," she said, looking at my basket, suddenly casual.

I wanted to yell that I was still waiting for her answer. But I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

"How do you know that?"

"The wind told me. It's as talkative as you." She lowered her voice. "At the beginning, you know, I thought a bit like you. But now . . ."

She waved her hand vaguely and murmured, "What does it matter, after all? They are dead, so they are the losers."

"You don't think that the assassins should be punished?"

"There are moments when even faith seems like a privilege ... Are you leaving again soon?"

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[8] Slaves who ran off and hid in the hills.

"I don't know. I searched through the furrows only to find that madness makes everything fail."

Thirtieth day

Like a frustrated child, I stayed leaning against the tree, digging at the dust with the toe of my shoe. I thought with some bitterness of the intense days of quest and fever that I had just lived through, and I made a sad assessment of the situation. I was waiting for Soledad; I wanted to talk to her once more, and maybe say goodbye. I felt like an empty bottle tossed around by the waves, and I was trying to reorient my thoughts towards that other return that I feel is inescapable. I was wondering if much snow had fallen, back there, and if my hibiscus, prisoner behind the frosted windows, would finally bloom. Of course, I also thought of you, always telling me to look only at what's coming, and never what's gone. I envy your serenity.

All of a sudden, a hand was on my arm. It was Soledad. "If you want to know what happened here before you, everything that will happen after you, you should go see the madman on the Morne Rouge," she whispered to me. "They say that he was born in the caul, and that he can describe with uncanny precision everything that will happen in your life, to your dying day. He supposedly went crazy after the death of his wife, a witch who was stoned to death. They claim he talks to the plants, that he knows all their secrets and can even communicate with the spirits. He lives up there, in a house with no doors or windows, on the highest peak of the morne. There's a steep path that leads up there. I've never ventured up there, but I know that you can get there by Jacob Butte."

I did my best to hide my agitation from her, but I shook at the idea of having to take that route. Aunt Célia had one day told me that after the triumph of the Cuban revolution, at the very beginning of his reign, Satrapier had had twenty young men buried alive at the base of that morne, men who had come to *Belle-Ile* to lead a guerilla war against him. Among them were the two sons of Gertrude Dravelles, Aunt's best friend since high school. Gertrude was elegant and coquettish, and she always left the scent of sandalwood in her wake. I remember that she often came to the house when I was young. She always came at about six o'clock and spent part of the evening talking with Aunt in a low voice. From time to time, little sparrow -like chirps escaped from her throat, little short cries that mixed with the clicking of her fan, which she never stopped waving. Gertrude went crazy after her sons were killed. Now she lives shut up in a room in her daughter Liliane's apartment in New York. Sitting in an armchair in front of a window, she counts the passersby from morning to night, and writes the number in a little notebook.

I had completely forgotten about Soledad's presence. In front of me was Gertrude's face, and in my ears, the clicking of her fan. I went to see her in New York at her daughter's house twice. Of course, she didn't recognize me. She asked me when I would finally decide to marry Gérald. "If you prefer Ulrick, you should just say so. That's not a problem. They're both handsome, aren't they?"

She had taken down from the dresser a photo in which the sons must have been nineteen and twenty or twenty-two. The age of dreams. She contemplated them with a blissful expression.

"That's how it is," Liliane had told me as she walked me back to the elevator. "All the girls are Gérald's or Ulrick's fiancées. Poor mama . . ."

I thanked Soledad, and with a gentle pressure of my fingers, I expressed to her my gratitude that she hadn't asked any questions about my sudden silence. Did she understand my hesitation about going by way of Jacob Butte? Here nothing is said, but everything is known. Soledad must know what happened there, even if she was born long afterwards, her mother or even her father must have told her.

Without waiting any longer, I returned to the house where I found Maria seated in the courtyard on a little wall. From there, she could see the whole street. She had her arms up and was braiding her hair. The flabby flesh of her arms, spilling out of the holes of her sleeves, hung on either side like two empty purses. A large wrinkle creased the middle of her forehead. She seemed worried. I was sure that she had been watching for me while I talked to Soledad.

"Good evening, Maria, what are you watching for like that?"

"You know very well what I'm watching for," she grumbled. "So why are you so stubborn, child? My heart's going to stop beating because of you."

"Maria, I don't have much time to talk to you. I have to go somewhere before it gets too late. I just came to change my shoes."

She grabbed my arm. I was surprised to feel so much strength in such a worn old body. Her fingers were short, roughened by the years of work. That didn't detract from her grip. Her nails had become invisible, over the years adopting the color of her skin.

"Since you got here, you are seeking, I don't know what you are seeking. Maybe you are seeking to put all the water in the ocean into a thimble? Maybe you are seeking to know where the bones of your ancestors are buried? You don't know very well who you are or where you're going. What do you want? Huh? Tell me!"

She shook her head. The skin of her neck, all folded, was like the black furrows in a plowed field.

"Your blood is hot like milk boiling in a tin pot," she continued. "You can't know how much you scare me, oh yes, with good reason, you scare me. I sense that you bring unhappiness with each step. Listen to me, I who have spent so many years in this body that sometimes I even forget my name: I am warning you, he who walks and seeks always ends up finding. You get what you look for. That proverb is as old as the earth. I won't say anything more."

She let go of my arm angrily and turned her back to me to indicate that she was ending our talk.

Without saying a word, I went in to change my shoes and went back out towards the Morne Rouge. I was going to have to go up Jacob Butte. The way was hard, winding and bordered with cliffs so tall that I couldn't even see the ground at the bottom of them. Maria had guessed where I was planning to go, and knew she couldn't change my mind. I vaguely tried to decipher the meaning of the words she had spoken. For a moment, her voice echoed in my ears, but the only effect of her warnings was to augment my curiosity. I felt, as my mother often said, a *saint poussé*, an irresistible force that guided me towards an unknown mystery.

The sunset lasted for ages, and the reds that spread here and there on the horizon gave me the impression that I was following a road headed directly for Hell. The landscape in that place is dismal, the vegetation meager, some trees scattered here and there, and *aconit* bushes whose blue flowers, despite their abundance, can't lift the dismal greyness of the place.

No sound, except that of the little rocks rolling under my feet and tumbling down the slope with a regular rhythm. The sound came back to me like an echo, like it was ricocheting on some obstacle at the bottom of the morne. From time to time, the crunching of dead leaves, caused by an animal running away at top speed. As long as I didn't happen on a grass snake, I thought, suddenly halting my steps. No need to hide it from you, Claire, I was terribly scared. But I tricked myself by saying that my feet were leading me despite myself.

I finally arrived at a sort of plateau and found myself suddenly faced with three gigantic trees planted in a triangle. They were full of enormous fruits whose reddish-brown skin made me think of calabashes. Their great trunks were like three enormous barrels, and their lowest branches spread out as if they wanted to dissuade any passer-by from following the path. They are so thick, I thought, that one could live in them, without fear of sun or rain.

I was there, speechless, my eyes lifted towards these impressive trees, when suddenly I saw him. I perceived him, rather, and my assurance abandoned me. I didn't know where he had come from, but I felt his presence behind me as the odor of a freshly cut herb surrounded me -- vervain maybe, and something that also reminded me of pepper. I thought of those terrifying stories that had accompanied my childhood, about witches who marinate their victims in big tubs full of brine. Hadn't his wife been a witch? I turned despite my fear, and my gaze fell on a small man, all dried up like a dead branch. His emaciated face disappeared behind an impressive beard and the piercing gleam of his eyes. He picked up the little packet of herbs and with his free hand, brushed the trunks of the trees and said, "These are the only fruit trees that succeeded in overcoming the hostility of this place. They grew and aged as fast as I did. They took root without any particular care, and quickly their branches intermingled, twisted around each other in such a way that no one will ever know which branch belongs to which tree. For the Taïnos, who inhabited this place before we did, apricot trees were sacred."

"I have never seen any so large," I responded. My voice shook slightly.

"If you're afraid, why did you come?"

"I'm not afraid," I protested, lying clumsily.

He circled the trees. I followed him and found his house. It was almost as if it had been built inside the tree trunks.

"From the top of this morne, I can see everything; that's what scares them. My two eyes can follow all the little roads and the smallest detours without having to move. Without worrying about being spotted, I can peer into all the mysteries of the valley. I saw you coming from far off, and I even know what brought you here."

I followed in his footsteps as if I had been invited into his domain. Since he knew what brought me, I didn't need to embarrass myself with excuses anymore. Under the arch of the trees, I felt as if I was entering a cave. I had to duck to edge my way through an opening cut into the wall into a room with a rather high ceiling. All around the room were wooden boxes full of yellowed papers. A table and two chairs carved from beams and an old portable stove sitting on the floor were the only furniture in the room.

"There's a bench and some blankets. You can rest if you want. I know that that road can wear out even the most reckless travelers. With time, I have gotten used to seeing people arrive like that. You aren't the first one to venture this far," he told me, putting the bunch of herbs in a pot and pouring over it some water he got from a clay jar.

He put the pot on the little stove and soon the water began to bubble, diffusing the sweet gentle fragrance throughout the room. I stayed standing, leaning on the massive wooden table. He seemed to not pay any attention to my presence and continued, “Though they warned you, told you all kinds of things about me, your feet brought you here despite yourself. Do you want some tea?”

Without waiting for my answer, he handed me a tumbler full of steaming liquid. His fingers were bony. His whole body was like a shrub, old but very tough. “Drink!” he said.

I put the steaming tea to my lips, and my whole body was tense with a painful waiting. I wanted him to talk to me about *Belle-Ile*, to tell me all about it, I was ready to drink his words like drops of a lustral saving water. But he started talking about his trees.

“I chose the confines of silence and solitude, behind these three trees.” (His voice seemed heavy, full of thunder, reverberating in the darkness.) “From their roots and their trunks rises their serene immobility. Like a fortress, they spread their knotty branches with calm sovereign power. Here, in *Belle-Ile*,” he said, frowning, “they like to drive away solitude. They like to hunt it down and pelt it with stones, like a witch. They force the barricades in order to drive it out.”

I liked his measured gestures, his glances that seemed animated by a powerful wave of memories impossible to bury.

“They tell all kinds of stories about me,” he said again after a few minutes of silence, during which I could hear the leaves on the trees outside rustling. “As if they wanted to make the secrets I know rot under my tongue. They say that shut up in these trees, buried in their roots, there are two spirits that guard my house and protect me. They call them “the two *bakas*[9] of the madman of the Morne.”

“They also say that your wife was a witch!” I uttered the sentence and held my breath.

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[9] Evil spirits.

He turned towards me. His eyes scrutinized me briefly and I had the impression that he was gazing into the innermost depths of my soul. I had thrown a shawl around my shoulders, which I now drew slightly around my chest. He had a mocking little smile as he went towards the front of the house. Again, I followed him. On a narrow raised porch whose railings almost touched the trees was a rough wooden bench. Apparently wanting to let me sit, he crouched, leaning up against the wall.

Night had fallen on the trees and completely enveloped the valley. From time to time, the flight of a firefly, a star that shone a little more than the others, cast a bit of light into the darkness.

From the pocket of his old tunic, he drew a tobacco pouch and, his head thrown back, he started rolling tiny little cigars.

"So they told you my wife was a witch?" (I sensed emotion in his voice.) "Pray to Heaven every day to send you, even before your daily bread, the bread of indulgence. She was neither a witch nor a fairy. She was too good, that's all. Her name was Rosélia. Even if I had known lots of other women before her, she was, for me, the very essence of life. Those that really knew her know that neither gall, nor cruelty, nor the most savage traps could touch her purity. She often said to me, 'The world is just an enormous stupid mess, papa.' I answered her with a little inside joke: 'I'd rather the thunderbolts split me in a thousand pieces than be your papa, Rosélia.' And she laughed, she laughed so willingly, and that laugh was like the freshness of a fine rain on land worn out with sun. For me, every morning of life near her was like a new childhood. Rosélia knew that people envied her and were scared of her. Do you know how they took her from me? She was crushed in the dust, pulverized under a hail of murderous rocks. One evening in December, a frenzied crowd broke her body."

He spit this last sentence as if it was a nut that was stuck in his throat.

"At that time," he continued, somewhat more slowly, "we lived at Ravine Diamant. Do you know Ravine Diamant?"

I shook my head.

"If you happen across it, turn back."

He closed his eyes, then, like in a dream, he began to talk quietly: "Just like me, Rosélia knew which plants helped sickness and sorrow. One day, someone brought her a little two-year-old girl. Her stomach was so large that it was hard to see her little legs. The mother had already lost four others before they even turned three. A fever, bad *marigot* water, a wound badly stitched, bread and milk too rarely, I don't even remember why. Rosélia spent days and nights trying to restore some life into that sick little body. The child was so weak that she had to put a dropper between her chapped lips to get her to drink anything. On the morning of the seventh day, she asked me to go to town to get some alcohol and some *assa-foetida*. While I was gone, the child died. I didn't get back until after nightfall because I had missed the last bus back to the Ravine.

"A friend, Gustave, the only one who still comes up here to talk to me about anything other than the madness that haunts our country, was waiting for me. He flagged me down and ran towards me. His face was a mask of pain. 'Madness has fallen on the Ravine, my brother,' he repeated. 'You can't go to your house, Rosélia isn't there anymore. She's gone. She left at the same time as the child she was caring for.'

“I looked at him, dazed, not understanding. The sky started turning above my head. He dragged me to his house. I didn’t have the strength to scream, nor to ask questions. I felt the life draining out of me and I fell into a faint. When I came to, it was night, dogs were yelping. I was lying in a room, and at the foot of the bed was Gustave, his face pale, lit by the flames of a hurricane lamp. ‘Gustave,’ I said, ‘I dreamed. No need to tell me what happened. I already know.’

“It was true. In my dream, I had heard a cry, an inhuman cry, the cry of a beast whose throat was being cut, then it was followed by a wild stampede, voices bursting from everywhere: ‘*Ba li, ba li, pran li, li twò pa bon*.’ I saw then, at the bottom of the path leading to our house, a mob. A furious crowd dragging a woman, her clothes in tatters. Behind her there was another, her hair tangled, rolling on the ground writhing in pain: ‘*Pitit mwen o, yon sèl pitit mwen oooooo*.’ She tried to get up, supported by two other women. She continued to moan, ‘She killed my daughter, my only child, *pitit cheri mwen oooooooo*!’ They thrashed Rosélia, hitting her and finally tearing off what clothes she had left on. She went from one slap to another, from one kick to another, trying as well as she could to protect her head and her breasts. ‘Finish it, *se pou nou fini ak lobèy sa yo*!’ screamed the crowd. And wham! A strident cry split the air. Rosélia fell, her arms stretched out as if she were on a cross. I saw her nails scraping in the dirt; she got up and then fell again, her face buried in the dust. In one movement, the crowd seized upon a pile of rocks along the side of the road. A little boy forced his way through the crowd, limping slightly. ‘*Men pa w chòche*! Here’s one for you, witch!’ he cried. He threw an enormous rock at her face. The rocks were falling with a soft noise. ‘*Fout li youn nan bounda*! Shove a rock up her ass! She isn’t moving anymore! She’s dead!' I heard the crowd still yelling. Rosélia had known all of them for a long time, and she had surely cared for all of them at some point.

"In this country, we see evil everywhere except where it really is. The next day, I thanked Gustave and told him I was leaving Ravine Diamant forever. I went back to where the whole scene took place. The house had been pillaged and then set afire. Eyes misty with tears, her hand at her jaw, a young girl was crouched in front of a pile of ashes. I asked her what had happened. 'I don't know. They say she ate Chabine's child. Chabine went to see Ozange the *bòkòr*[10] and he said that this woman had caused her child's death. I'm not saying she actually did hurt the child, I wasn't there. But they're saying a black cat went into the house, and just after that, Rosélia said the child was dead.'

"They had covered Rosélia's body with a pile of stones and rubble. I unburied it and took it with me. It's out there, under the apricot trees. You aren't scared?"

"No," I replied, and it was true. "So you have lived through a lot of things?"

"I have seen many things, mostly," he said. "People say I'm crazy because we live in a place where speaking is forbidden, and I speak. They say I'm crazy because my words have the deadly brilliance of shards of glass stuck in the soles of your feet."

"I don't believe a word of what they say about you. All I know is that the silence is like a sea of sand that is little by little swallowing up *Belle-Ile*. Under that tide, the people remain immobile, and their bodies liquefy bit by bit. They give themselves over to silence, bound hand and foot. Then one day they find themselves stuck, with madness as their only release."

He then told me about having spent ten years in Satrapier's prisons, where he saw so many men and women fall ... In the evenings when they rang the evening bells, the prisoners crammed into the cells began to pray. Each one was waiting for the moment when the guard would appear, carrying the list of those whom he had to bring to the edge of the cliff that overlooks the sea in order to throw them off, a bullet in their backs. Then I told him about your father, who had also disappeared in Satrapier's jails.

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[10] sorcerer

I wasn't hurried anymore. It was the middle of the night, and even if I had wanted to, I wouldn't have been able to find my way home again. I pulled the shawl around my shoulders again and made myself comfortable against the bench. In the darkness I could make out only the contours of his face. The smoke rings from his cigar drifted up and were lost among the branches of the trees. I began to tell him about my childhood. About the silence and the anguish that sometimes filled the house where I lived with a grandmother who didn't ever want any of us to say we were afraid of anything. I told him about the nights when they came with their hoods and their guns, and then I described to him my years back there, in the countries whose names I could never figure out how to pronounce. Like Grandmother and Aunt did, I call them "foreign countries." Even after all these years, I have never learned to talk loudly, nor to look people in the eyes. Just like Aunt, I always sing hesitantly, in little short bursts, and I hurry to finish. As if I were afraid to break the silence.

At that moment, he said something that, I think, will resonate in my memory for a long time: "*Belle-Ile* is a beautiful casket that, unfortunately, can contain nothing. It lets everything escape like sand between fingers. It scatters childhood, leads sanity astray, flings dreams to the four winds, chases away love and light, and along all its paths leaves only the taste of spilled blood."

Morning arrived and found us huddled up on the porch. The scent of dew reached us. The sky was already all blue. I took a deep breath of the icy air and felt as though I had been purified.

He got up and went out to gather dry branches. I followed him to help light the fire. From a paper sack, he produced two pieces of cassava, put some salted water on them to resoften them, and then turned them on the fire before handing me the larger one.

"Eat! An empty sack can't stay upright. You have to get back on the road now. Watch out for dogs."

"Dogs?" I asked him.

"Yes. I've heard that, in the north of *Belle-Ile*, bands of dogs are spreading terror in some remote villages."

I looked at him for a long time to assure myself that he wasn't just trying to scare me, and I tell you, Claire, I had to take my courage in both hands in order not to beg him to walk me back down.

"I just want you to be aware. Don't take the wrong road."

I left him. How can it be, I wondered, thinking of Jane and Jean-Christophe and their friends, that all these people read the papers and listen to the radio but don't know anything about the danger that's lying in wait for them? I remembered how many of them were angry at me for having brought up the subject at that famous party.

The road was much easier on the way back than on the way there because I just had to let my momentum carry me. I tumbled down more than I walked. I arrived sweating and out of breath, and I found Maria sitting in the same place.

"Maria, did you spend the night there?"

"And you, insolent one, where are you coming from with your head like a chicken that just saw a *malfini*[11]?"

She got up and eyed me up and down, head to foot, to make her disapproval known. She knew I hadn't come back to bed. She maybe thought I had spent the night with a man.

"Don't be mean, Maria. It's not what you think. I'm leaving this afternoon, but before I go, I want to talk to you about dogs."

An exclamation of surprise escaped her lips: *Adje*! She sat down again and put her hand to her mouth.

I felt that this was a puzzle whose pieces I needed to put back together. I saw her glance all around furtively. I came back to the topic: "What's going on with the dogs in this country, Maria?"

She peered at me for a long time. I don't know what she found, but she got up and signaled that I should follow her. She led me down a little passage behind the house. A little channel carried used water to the street. It was covered with silt. Tadpoles wriggled in the pool.

"This is what you are like," she told me. "Like them, you are always moving."

"The dogs, Maria."

"Shht!" she said.

She pulled the hem of her skirt up between her legs and sat on the edge of the pool. I joined her.

"It happened near the bridge that links the Massacre River to the rest of *Belle-Ile*. People got into the habit of coming there to dump their garbage. Trucks arrived at sunset, unloaded their contents, and left, only to come back the next day. Finally there formed a mountain so high that no one could see the river anymore. Of course, the garbage attracted all the dogs around, the rats and other animals fond of trash. It wasn't unusual to hear the growls and cries of beasts ferociously fighting coming from that area.

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[11] Bird of prey.

"Little by little, people also started going to get new supplies at the dump. Women found bits of cloth that they used to make clothes for their children, cans that became utensils or dishes, plastic bags that they tied around their ankles with bits of string to make shoes. The children gathered anything and everything that amused them. For the people who fled the famine in the Northwest to move down to the riverbanks, the dump was a godsend. Entire families fed themselves on what they could glean from it. They came right away after the truck left, arriving in groups, so one family wouldn't swipe the best bits. They had even established a system that let them know how much food or how many rags this or that family had already gotten. As for the dogs, they only came after the people had gone, but their sustenance decreased more and more. They began to spy on their rivals. Feeling themselves watched, the men, women, and children began to arm themselves with pickaxes and sticks to go to the dump.

"The dogs kept a lookout for several days before attacking. Believe me, it was like it was happening next door. At night, all the dogs in the country -- and God knows there are a few! -- howled like they had been cursed. The battle of the dump lasted a long time. And during that time, every day, at sunset, the trucks kept doing their job and dropped off their cargo at the same spot. Unmoved, the drivers operated the dumping mechanisms and spilled the trash, indiscriminately burying those who were dying, those moaning, those crying, those that were already dead, dog or human. They fought to the very last child and the very last puppy."

Maria was breathing like she had just climbed a hill. I put a hand on her chest; her heart was racing. The dogs frightened her; that was why she hadn't wanted to talk about them. I ran to the kitchen to get her a glass of water, and when I got back I could see that she was crying. On her cheeks, the tears followed the creases from her wrinkles.

I took her hands, which were moist. I told her about the band of dogs I had seen in the alley the night I arrived. She shook her head sadly.

"I saw them too, several times," she told me. "They are demons, and there are some in every city, in every neighborhood."

"What's going to happen, Maria?"

She wiped away a tear and gave a little sigh that echoed in my ears, like a long moan that covered *Belle-Ile* like a shroud. I felt Maria's suffering running through me like blood, and I thought, Claire, of all those secret pains, all those sighs that we barely dare to breathe, and all the silences that grip this country. I spent the rest of the morning haunted by that story. Is the solution, then, for all of *Belle-Ile* to let itself be buried under bad memories, under blood and bodies, like in the Northwest where they were buried with the garbage?

Thirty-first day

It's night, and I'm writing to you for the last time. I am in the little lean-to that serves as Maria's room. I have relieved Jane from her post. Maria is sick. She has a high fever and is delirious sometimes. I can't understand what she's saying very well. But from time to time, she emerges from her nightmares with a wild-eyed look and talks of damnation. I think it's all because of the dogs. Like Grandmother did, she has put a Chinese lantern in front of a holy image. It's a picture of the Sacred Heart. The little flame throws yellowish light on His blond hair. He has a red heart pierced by an arrow.

Through a hole in the sheet-metal roof, I can see a corner of the sky, and I have the strange impression that even the stars have lost their brilliance. They look to me like little trembling dots, frightened and pale.

Outside, the trees rustle gently and shiver. They are magnificent trees, an *autocarp* and a mango tree with long shiny leaves. They seem so full of life. The mangos hang at the ends of the branches and rub on the sheet metal like rolling stones. Their exuberant branches and their generosity can't, unfortunately, protect us from madness, nor from spilled blood, nor from the weight of silence.

However, I want to believe, as the philosopher said, that we must at all costs be wary of the cynic who would have us believe that "only catastrophe is fruitful."

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